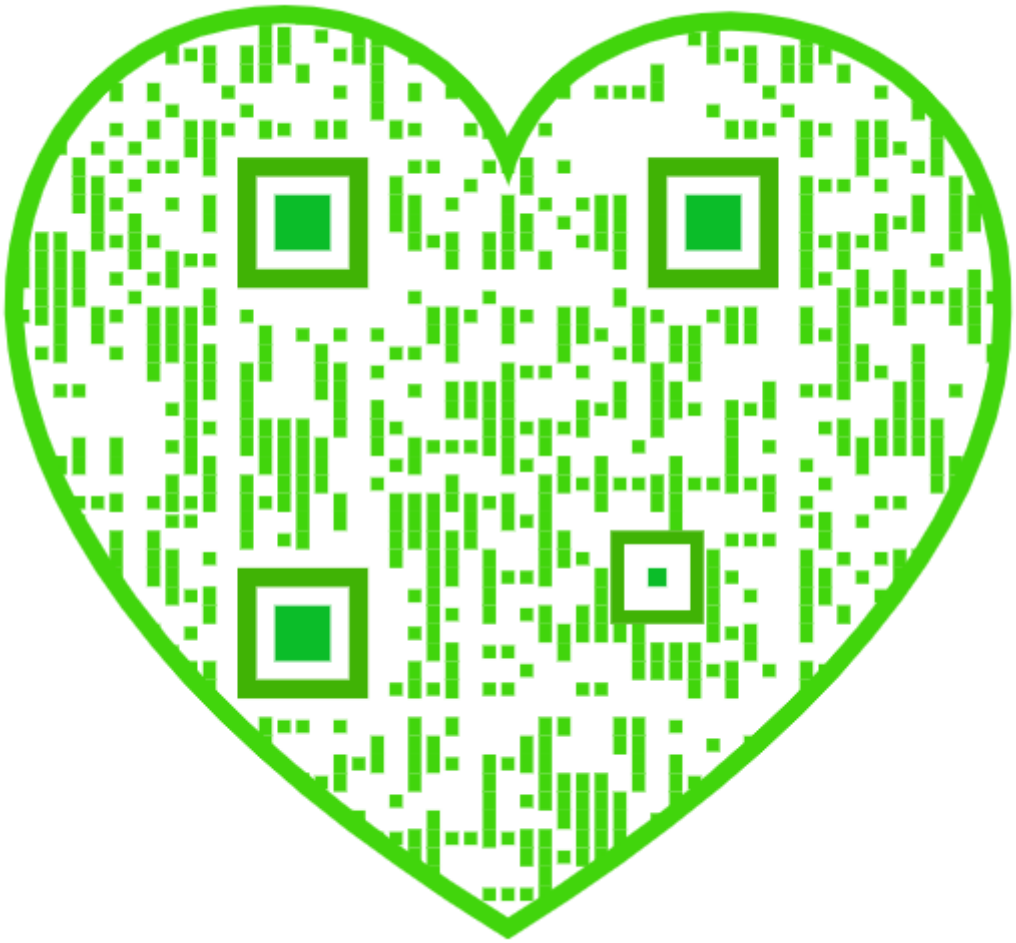
DILLON HUNT

AND THE DESERT OASIS RESORT

The first book in the Dillon Hunt Adventure series!

CHAD STEWART



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CHAD STEWART

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ISBN: 978-0-9958288-8-9

ISBN: 978-0-9958288-9-6 (e-book)

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For my wife, Summer
and my kids:
Joshua, Phillip, Elizabeth, and Michelle.
I love you with all my heart
and thank you that you put up with all
my crazy endeavours!

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Epilogue

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I

THE CALL FOR ORION

The explosion ripped through the wall and into the hallway. Chunks of concrete and wood flew everywhere.

Kade was rocked backward by the blast as he neared the lab and hit the wall hard. The blow knocked the wind from him as he crumpled to the ground. His ears rang, his vision blurred, and he could smell smoke and saw the flicker of a fire down the hall across from where the lab was. Kade heard the alarms ring out and felt the cool spray of the sprinkler systems as they were activated from the heat of the fire. The downpour soaked his white lab coat in a matter of seconds.

He tried to get up, but the room tilted and whirled around him and his feet slid out from under him. His head hurt and the hallway spun. He tried to shake off the dizziness and, as his vision started to come around, he noticed a figure exit from the lab. The person was dressed all in black and Kade saw that he was coming his way; stepping over the rubble and nimbly working his way carefully down the hall. Kade tried again to rise, but he couldn't. Pain throbbed in the back of his head and neck. It was no use; he felt as though all the strength in him was sapped out. All he could do was lean against the wall and hope that help would come soon.

The intruder strode down the hall and stood above Kade, looking down at him. The man's face was hidden by a mask so that he couldn't make out who it was. As the figure looked at him he could sense somehow that he was smirking

beneath the dark mask. The only thing that Kade could see were those piercing dark eyes as the unknown man stared intently at him.

Kade feebly reached his hand out at the man in the mask but the dark figure swatted it away. He was about to continue to move down the hallway, but suddenly stopped. He looked back at the battered man for an instant before shooting his hand out and backhanding Kade across the face.

The stinging blow hit him with such force that it sent his head rocking to the side. The dizziness intensified as he felt the sharp crack of the man's hand. He tried to shake it off, and even attempted to stand again, but the darkness started to overcome him. His strength was gone. He slumped back against the wall and faded from consciousness.

"KADE! KADE!" HE HEARD A WOMAN'S VOICE YELL AT HIM AS HIS EYES flickered open. His head pounded and his vision was blurry as he began to wake. As his eyes focused he saw the face of Trina staring at him; concern etched across those delicate features.

"Quick! I need medical help here!" she turned and called out to any first responder that was near.

By this time the sprinklers were shut off and the smoke had cleared from he hall. "Are you okay?" she turned back and asked her friend.

He nodded slightly as he tried to rise but then fell back. "I think so," he managed to say.

"What happened?"

"I … I don't know," Kade replied. "I was heading to the lab when suddenly —the man! There was a man leaving the lab! Did he take anything? What's missing?"

"Kade, I need you to focus. What did this man look like?"

"He was … he was tall. No, I was laying on the ground." Kade rubbed his forehead. The details in his mind were as jumbled as the rubble around him. "I think he liked that I was hurt."

Trina's eyes closed, as if in prayer. "Kade, what did he look like?"

"Blackness," Kade whispered.

Trina moved aside while a rescuer came over and started to assess the man.

"What did he get?" Kade asked again, concern evident in his voice.

Trina shook her head slightly. "We don't know yet," she replied. "Our teams are trying to determine if anyone was killed in the blast first."

"Dr. Johnson!" Kade suddenly exclaimed as he tried to rise once more. The EMT put a hand on his shoulder and settled him back. "Please tell me that Johnson is okay!"

Trina was silent. Kade's eyes went wide as he realized what Trina was telling him in her silence. A tear streaked his face.

"You need to rest," the rescuer said as another one came over with a stretcher. "We need to get you to the hospital."

Kade nodded weakly as he wiped the tear from his face.

Trina put her hand on his arm. "Don't worry. We'll tell you everything as soon as we have more information," she said.

She stood up as the men hoisted Kade onto the stretcher. Before they wheeled him away, he grabbed Trina's arm and looked up at her, desperation in his eyes.

"You need to do whatever it takes to get these guys," he declared. "Whatever it takes! For Johnson."

TRINA WALKED INTO THE LAB A FEW HOURS LATER WITH A FORENSIC EXPERT WHO was trying to determine all the elements which played a factor in the recent events. She could see overturned tables, pieces of equipment that were blown apart, and some stains of blood where Dr. Johnson had been found. Fortunately, the invasion happened a few hours after Trichem Labs officially closed for the day and most of the staff had already left for the evening.

"We're conducting an autopsy on the body of Dr. Johnson in order to determine if he was killed before the explosion, or if that was the cause of

death," the forensic expert stated matter-of-factly.

"Why did you have to be so committed to your work?" Trina whispered to herself as she stooped down and examined the floor where they found Johnson's body.

"What was that?"

"Oh … nothing," she replied.

The lab looked like it was something out of a war movie. She glanced up to where the security cameras were positioned. Some of them looked scarred and burned. "Did those get any relevant footage of the event?"

"We're looking at the recordings now, but so far there's nothing conclusive."

"Nothing conclusive!" she exclaimed as anger brimmed her voice. "How can we have perfectly good security systems and not know what we're dealing with here?"

"Our Crime Scene Investigation Team is on it," he replied sternly. "If there's something of note, we'll find it."

"Sorry," she replied softly. "Do you mind if I take a look around by myself?"

"Sure thing. Just try not to disturb anything."

Trina nodded.

Trichem labs was desperate to find out who had done this. And Trina was pretty sure she knew why they had done it as she approached the walk-in refrigeration unit.

The unit was recessed into the concrete wall which made it a perfect spot to escape from an explosion. It's massive steel door that was singed and scratched on the outside was slightly ajar. She opened it the rest of the way and stepped inside, surveying the many different vials that lined the shelves. She stopped half way down and looked at the empty rack that was conspicuously evident with the label underneath it which read: Genesis.

She gasped and shook her head. She squeezed her eyes shut and opened them again, hoping she had seen wrong the first time. But she hadn't. Genesis was gone. She knew that whoever had taken this chemical compound had a force in their hands that was more powerful than anything they could imagine. They probably didn't even realize the extent to which it could be used; she hoped they

didn’t realize the extent to which it could be used.

She knew they had to get it back. They had to do whatever it took.

She had but one recourse even though it unsettled her: It was time to call in the Orion Group.

2

THE WATCH

The day was overcast with dark clouds looming; threatening to pour down its wrath at any moment. Dillon hurried across the street and into the dark forest. His dog Bruno, a large playful German Shepherd, followed close behind, sniffing every second tree as he went. This place held special significance for Dillon; it was where his most thrilling adventures took place. Whenever he was over here, Dillon could pretend to be anything. And today. Today, Dillon was a fearless adventurer, in search of the lost treasure of The Ancient Skull!

As Dillon stepped into the dark forest, the area around him transformed in his mind's eye. No longer was it filled with thick pine, fir, and spruce trees, but now he was overshadowed by the dark canopy of the tropical Amazon forest.

He looked around at his surroundings, taking careful stock of where he was; he knew that every forward scout would tell you that it's all too easy to lose your bearings in this kind of thick, desolate forest.

The air was dank, filled with the moisture of a recent rain. As he moved carefully through the trees, following the small trail he had unearthed, he noticed the tracks he had been looking for! *I knew it was true!* he thought to himself.

For years everyone had told him that the Amazon creatures known as the Giant Hape Crushers were just a fantasy; a myth that was created to keep people from exploring this part of the forest. But now Dillon knew it was not! For right in front of him were the very tracks that proved his theory. And they were fresh!

He knew this could only mean one thing: he was close to the fortress of the Ancient Skull, the legendary city of monsters, which held such gold and glory for the one who could find it. Oh … and also danger and possible death. That was okay with Dillon though as he knew the risks. He had trained all his life for this moment. A little danger wasn't going to stop him now!

Suddenly there was a massive sound of crashing trees and low guttural grunts as something huge barrelled through the trees toward him. He quickly dived to the side and rolled off the path and through the brush, landing firmly on his feet in a ready stance. Sliding his long slender sabre from its sheath he readied himself for the fight.

The creature blew through the trees with ferocity, sending leaves everywhere and splintering branches from their perch upon the Amazon trunks. It was huge; much taller than Dillon. Even though it was slightly hunched Dillon could tell that it was at least eight feet in height. It had the face of a man but the teeth of a gorilla. Its huge mass was ripped with muscle, and the way it stood and walked resembled that of an ape. Its upper body was hairless while its lower body had thick ape-hair all over it. He had to dive out of the way in order to avoid being crushed under the massive hulk of the beast and the flying debris it has caused!

He rolled around and slashed at the back of the creature's legs but the beast's hide was too thick to do any damage. It turned around and Dillon saw its terrible red eyes boring into him. It roared. Spittle sprayed from its mouth as it issued its challenge. And its breath! Oh the stench! Despite the frightening nature of the creature Dillon's resolve to make it to the fortress of The Ancient Skull was not deterred. Dillon's resolve to fight his way through was at its height.

It came in with its fangs barred, but Dillon nimbly dodged out of the way and delivered another blow, this time in the thigh. Clearly it was irritated as it roared; spit issuing from its foul mouth … again. Dillon laughed. That must have confused the dim-witted creature, for it looked at him with a puzzled expression on its face. This gave Dillon the opportunity he needed to dive gracefully around the side of the creature, roll, and come up in a dead run down the path as he sheathed his sword. Dillon knew now that he couldn't fight this thing on even ground. It was eight feet tall with razor sharp fangs, and breath that rivalled even

his little sister Gwen's when she woke up in the morning!

No, for now, he was content running through the woods like a maniac, seeking for some advantage he could use against the beast. And there it was: the bridge of Kazakdoon!

The bridge stood about thirty feet long and spanned a gulf that was at least a thousand feet deep!

As he started to run across the bridge he began to feel the sway of it and the warm wind on his face. Dillon knew that he was in more trouble than he first realized when, at the half way point of the bridge, he heard the roar of the Giant Hape Crusher as it crashed through the trees and onto the bridge. The sudden jolt of its weight sent Dillon flying into the air, but he somehow managed to land on his feet and kept running. As he glanced back he saw the monstrous creature bounding towards him with such ferocity that it drained the blood from his face.

Dillon's heart pounded. The beast was gaining on him and it was pretty clear that he might not make it to the other side in time. As he ran, he realized that the only way he might make it was to leap from the bridge and hope that he was close enough to the other side for his momentum to propel him far enough to the ledge of the cliff.

Dillon could almost feel the hot breath of the beast on his back which made him realize that it was now or never. He pumped his legs as fast as he could, drawing on all the resources his body could muster—pressing himself to the limit—trying to make up as much distance as he could before the jump. He glanced back for a moment and saw the creature reach out for him. He leaped with all his might.

The Giant Hape Crusher lunged for him as he sprang into the air; its long stocky fingers brushing the back of the air-borne adventurer's shirt. As Dillon flew from the bridge he took note of the clump of vines that sprouted from the edge of the cliff. He knew that those vines were the best shot of him getting out of this alive. He slammed into the side of the cliff and desperately grasped onto any of the corded plants he could. As he hit the edge of the cliff he smashed his knee on the rocky face, but it barely phased him as he knew he had bigger problems to deal with—like not falling a thousand feet to his death!

Thankfully the vines seemed to hold. He glanced back over his shoulder to see the Giant Hape Crusher staring at him in disbelief. It howled wildly, not sure of how to proceed. Luckily, because of the momentum he gathered from the run, Dillon landed only a few feet short from the top of the ledge. Quickly he scrambled up the cliff before the dumb creature realized that it was still within striking distance of the kid if it hurried off the bridge.

The agile adventurer scrambled to the top, looked back, and smirked at the dumbfounded creature who scratched its head stupidly.

“See ya!” Dillon yelled as he took off again through the trees, a little bit slower this time due to his banged-up knee. The wild scream that the Giant Hape Crusher issued told Dillon that the stupid creature just realized it could still chase him, and was probably doing just that.

Dillon wound through the path once more with as much haste as he could muster, but the stubborn creature was still pursuing as he could hear the trees crashing aside as the beast plowed through.

I have to find a spot to hide, he thought to himself as he suddenly realized that there was no way of out running this thing; even without his banged up knee. Besides, Dillon also had to admit to himself that he was starting to get really tired and needed to rest soon.

Just then, as he stumbled through a small creek, he saw what looked like a small hole in the side of a hill that had an overhang of vines coming down from it. Quickly he dashed inside, and not a moment too soon! For, as soon as he had touched the back wall to the small make-shift cave, the beast came bounding through the trees and into the creek. It continued to move on, about to step into the tree line beyond where Dillon was hiding, when it suddenly stopped. It lifted its nose into the air and sniffed around as though it had been tracking him by his scent this whole time.

Dillon froze, not even daring to breathe. He had his hands planted against the back of the hole and, as he was trying to readjust just a little in order to ensure that he was fully hidden, his hand grasped something that was lodged behind a root. It felt small and smooth. Dillon didn’t have time to examine it, so he pulled it out and quickly placed it into his pocket.

The beast came back toward the creek with its nose in the air. It sniffed around, up and then down, and then it looked in the young adventurer's direction. Its red eyes bored down toward the small hideout. Dillon could see through small openings in the overhanging vines that the creature probably knew he was there. Slowly it stalked over as it continued to sniff. It was made starkly clear at that moment that there was no way out of this except to fight, no matter how futile that might be. He quickly slid his finely crafted sabre from its sheath as the creature approached. When it was about ten feet away Dillon stepped slowly and calmly from his would-be hideout. The two locked eyes and the creature hunched down and snarled, ready to charge. Dillon positioned himself in the best defensive stance he could and awaited the rush.

The Giant Hape Crusher roared one last time and then lunged! The agile warrior came up with the sabre leading and then … off in the distance Dillon heard a distinctive call, "Dillon! It's time for dinner!" The call was faint, but brought the young boy back to reality. The beast was almost upon him. It closed in and then … Dillon felt the lick of its floppy tongue on his face. It knocked him down as it playfully licked him all over.

"Okay okay!" Dillon said to his dog, Bruno. "You got me! Ah! The fierce Giant Hape Crusher has triumphed!" Dillon laughed as he pushed his dog away.

Bruno growled playfully and issued a bark as he pushed him off. "Sorry boy, but it's time for dinner. Let's go!"

Bruno bounded after the young adventurer as he led the way back through the small forest and onto Glenview street. Dillon's house was literally right across the road from this most awesome "play zone" as he always called it. Unfortunately, there weren't many other kids in the neighbourhood who found it as enjoyable as he did. But that was okay. Dillon was content as he always had Bruno to play the other roles in their adventures. Sometimes he actually pretended that Bruno was a giant wolf that he saved in one way or other, and that he was bound to serve and protect him as they hunted for treasure and lost artifacts.

As he walked toward his house he pulled the object he had found from his pocket. He held it up in front of him and turned it over in his hand. It looked like

it was a small pocket watch. *Cool*! he thought, as he examined it. It was really tarnished and dirty, and the chain that was supposed to be attached to it was missing. It had a few dings on it and when he pushed the button in order to open it he had to pry it a bit before it unlatched. The inside was plain, the face of the watch was faded, and the hands were missing.

"What's goin on today little man?" Mom asked, as he walk into the driveway, breaking him from his thoughts of curiosity concerning the watch.

"Come on Mom! I'm taller than you now!" Dillon complained as he closed up the watch and placed it back in his pocket.

Mom just smiled her soft, almost mischievous smile, she always had when she was trying to get a rise out of one of her kids.

Dillon shrugged it off and offered a smile back of his own. "Nothing much," he responded. "You know … just hunting for the lost fortress of The Ancient Skull," he finished with an expressive flourish of his hands.

"That's nice," Mom responded without missing a beat or thinking anything was weird about his statement. "Don't forget to wash your hands for dinner."

"Really mom! I'm twelve you know!"

"Sorry, honey. You still have to wash your hands."

"No problem," Dillon responded with a shrug.

As Dillon headed to the bathroom to wash up for dinner his little sister, Gwen, raced up to him and wrapped her arms around his waist. "Hey Dragon Breath! What's that for?" he asked.

"I just missed hanging out with you and being part of your *crazy* adventures!" she said, a huge smile cresting her bright face. "Can we play one after dinner?"

"I don't know … I am pretty busy with homework."

Her lips quivered as she gave Dillon a sad look.

He smiled back. "Okay, maybe just for a bit."

Gwen gave him another huge hug and jumped back excitedly. "Maybe we can finish finding the mysterious treasure of woe?"

"Is that what we called it?" he asked. "We've gotta think up a better name than that!"

Gwen's smile seemed almost permanent at this point. "Did you find any treasures?" she asked.

"Not much. Just this old pocket watch and a five dollar bill," he said as he pulled the money from his pocket.

Gwen looked at the money with admiration. "Not much? That's great!"

"Well, if you like it so much then how about you keep the five dollars."

Gwen almost fell over. "Don't you want it?" she asked.

"No, I would rather have this old watch. I imagine it used to be the property of someone important long ago. It might even have a hidden map, or a clue to even greater treasure stuck inside somewhere.

"Wow," Gwen mouthed as she stared at the prize.

"Or maybe it's just an old watch," Dillon said, shrugging. "But let's pretend it is the holder of a map," he ended with a grin.

Gwen nodded her head eagerly. "You always find the coolest stuff," she said with abounding admiration. "How come?"

"I don't know. Just lucky I guess." Dillon looked down at the watch and turned it over in his hand. He didn't understand it, but he just had this feeling that this watch *was* important somehow. He just didn't know why. He looked up and smiled at Gwen and shrugged before moving passed her. Maybe his imagination was getting the best of him, he thought, as he chuckled to himself.

JAKE WATCHED DEREK WALK BACK TO THEIR CAR AS HE ROUNDED THE CORNER. His leg jiggled a little with nerves. If he was wrong about the kid … He took a deep breath and composed his face. Just in case this was the right kid, Jake purposely parked around the corner, out of the way of the view of Dillon's house. He didn't want any possibility of Dillon observing them and blowing their cover. It seemed silly on a rational level, but he knew he wasn't dealing with rationality here if Dillon was their boy.

"Well?" he asked as Derek settled in the passenger's seat. "How did it go? Did he see you?"

“No he didn’t see me,” Derek responded. “I made sure of that. I have to tell you though, I was pretty skeptical about your assessment of this kid. But it went better than I thought it would.” He took his ball cap off to reveal a cleanly shaven head; right to the scalp. On the right side of his head he had Japanese Kana characters tattooed, but never told anyone what they meant. Whenever anyone asked him about it he just got quiet and either changed the subject or walked away.

“That’s encouraging news,” Jake replied with a smile. “What happened?”

“Well … when you told me that you thought this kid had some sort of *luck* in finding objects that others would pass by, even if they were well hidden I thought you were exaggerating,” Derek said. “So I decided to test your little theory and I hid it in a place that no one should have found it.”

“Where?” asked Jake, intrigued.

Derek, looking down at his cap, paused for a moment, then looked up and met Jake’s waiting gaze. “I hid the watch in a natural alcove that had some tree roots growing down over the hole. In the alcove I buried it behind some more roots and moss. That thing should have stayed hidden for ever.”

Jake smiled. “I think we’ve found our kid,” he said as he reached over and turned the key in the ignition.

DILLON LAY IN HIS BED LATER THAT NIGHT STARING UP AT THE STRANGE WATCH he had found. It didn’t work anymore. He rubbed at it with the sleeve of his pyjama shirt, trying to clean the dirt and stains off of it. As he rubbed he noticed that there was some sort of writing on the back. He reached over and pulled his night lamp closer so he could get a better look at it. It was really hard to read, but, after a few moments he managed to make out the letters JTS. *JTS* he mouthed silently. He opened the watch up again and turned it around in his hands a few more times, looking for anything else he could see that was out of the ordinary. The fact that the hands were missing was definitely strange. He considered the letters for a few moments more. Dillon was sure that, if this

watch could talk, it would have a tale to tell that would make his own adventures seem lame in comparison! His mind drifted to fantastical imaginations of far off lands and amazing feats of heroism. He laughed to himself.

Sure, he thought. *It was probably just some old man's junk that he threw out when he couldn't find any replacement hands!*

Still, he couldn't help but wonder if there was something more. He couldn't explain it but he just had this feeling about this watch.

He suddenly heard footsteps coming down the hall towards his room. Quickly, he put the watch down, shut off the lights, and tucked himself under the covers, narrowly avoiding the "mom talk" about going to sleep promptly.

As he drifted off to sleep he smiled to himself as his mind started working out all the possible origins of the watch, a few of those thoughts even followed him into his dreams.

3

CHOCOLATE

Dillon and his friends walked onto the playground with confidence and expectation. They had thirty minutes left in their lunch break in order to continue their adventures of the high seas. As they climbed onto the Jungle Gym it transformed in their minds into a huge wooden ship that swayed back and forth, being tossed to and fro by the pounding of the swells of the ocean.

The boat threatened to come apart as it was hammered by the roaring waves. The crew might have felt better about their circumstances if they weren't being boarded by pirates! They were warned that this part of the sea was full of them, but the chance to be the ones who found the lost isle of the Dawn Breaker was too much temptation for the crew of six. Their Captain, Colton Drake, was sure they could make it despite the warnings that were given to them before they embarked.

The pirates came on in a fury. First mate, Chet Williams, narrowly dodged a wicked looking jagged pirate blade before coming back with a strike of his own. He scored a hit on the pirate's side; the sea dog grimaced and fell back a step. Williams smiled slightly, then his look turned to surprise as the pirate returned to the battle with the same fury as the storm that rocked the boat.

Williams worked his blade feverishly, matching blow with parry, parry with blow; neither scoring a hit. The ring of their blades was heard above that of the roar of the storm. The pirate pushed Williams back to the side of the ship with

his ferocity. Their blades locked and Williams could smell the stench of the pirate's breath as he moved in close, hoping to overpower the sailor. Williams thought he was about to perish when suddenly the pirate's eyes opened wide in disbelief and his press upon Williams slackened just before he fell to the deck. In the dark night Williams could see the face of his Captain standing there.

"You alright?" Captain Drake asked.

Williams nodded. He and Drake looked around, then leaped back into the fray in order to help the rest of the crew. As he fought off the pirates, Captain Drake would take any reprieve he could to glance at his compass in order to make sure that the ship was still on course, despite the battle.

"Check this out guys," said Jason, a stalky sixth grader, to his four friends who were just hanging out by the school fence talking about the latest you-tuber as they ate lunch.

They all turned and watched as they saw Dillon and five younger grade kids jumping all over the Jungle Gym, pretending to dodge blows and battle some unseen foes. The guys started chuckling.

"Man, is that kid ever weird," said one of Jason's friends.

"Ya … no doubt," Jason replied as he started walking toward the playground.

"What are you doin man?" asked another of his friends.

Jason turned to regard him and smiled. "I'm just gonna have some fun," he responded.

There were other kids watching the display from a distance but didn't seem to mind. From time-to-time another smaller kid or two would come up and start playing with the crew. Dillon welcomed anyone who wanted to engage in the adventure.

He noticed Jason and his gang approaching but continued the adventure anyway, knowing that it was probably about to come to an end.

Sure enough. As Jason walked up he pushed one of the younger kids out of the way. The kid sprawled out onto the grass and rolled a couple of times before

coming to a stop. Immediately Dillon jumped off the equipment and met Jason face-to-face.

“Hey man! Why don’t you leave us alone,” he said, getting between Jason and the rest of his “crew.”

“I just thought you might want some *real* people to fight,” Jason said with a sneer.

“No, we’re okay with the pirates of the Glass Sea,” responded Dillon.

“The what?” Jason asked incredulously.

“The pirates of the Glass Sea,” Dillon said matter-of-factly. “Don’t tell me you’ve never heard of them? They’re infamous for their murderous rage. They seek vessels to attack and pillage, murdering all in their way and hoarding all the treasure they acquire.”

“You’re weird man,” stated Jason, a tone of condescension in his voice.

“I know. It is strange that we use our *imaginations* to entertain ourselves. You’ve heard of that? Haven’t you?”

“Of course I have you nerd!” exclaimed Jason indignantly.

“Then maybe you would like to join us?” offered Dillon.

Jason shook his head slightly, unable to mask the disgust he had on his face. “Man, I could beat the crap out of you if I wanted. But you’re not worth my time. This thing, though?” he said as he noticed the watch in Dillon’s hand. Quickly, before Dillon could react, he snatched it from him. “What’s this?” he asked in a taunting voice.

“Hey man, not cool!” Dillon responded. “That’s mine!”

“Hunt, your family’s so poor your parents can’t even afford a proper watch for you!,” Jason exclaimed as he held it up. Dillon tried to grab it back, but Jason quickly pulled it away and shoved Dillon hard in the chest. Dillon stumbled back, but was able to maintain his footing.

Jason’s crew was quick to look around and see if any of the recess monitors had noticed what was going on. They hadn’t. Fortunately for Jason the playground was packed and the monitors were all preoccupied: some with other kids; some talking to one another; and one monitor, Mrs Jacobs, apparently thought there were more interesting things going on in the world of social media

as she had her face glued to her phone.

“It looks worthless,” said Jason. “Let’s see if it is.”

Before Dillon could try and grab at it again Jason threw it as hard as he could behind the playground and into … Miss Kettle’s yard! Dillon, and all the kids who had witnessed this, were horror struck.

Miss Kettle’s yard backed onto the school property and all the kids avoided her part of the fence like the plague. This was due to her dog, Chocolate. The name she gave her dog didn’t seem to match the dog itself except for maybe its color. Chocolate was a massive Rottweiler-Husky cross with dark brown fur. His bark was enough to scare the bravest of the kids at school. He didn’t show himself very often, but when someone ventured too close to the fence he would, most-times, let out a deep-throated bark that seemed to shake the very air. The worst part was that Miss Kettle’s yard was *full* of trees, plants, and shrubs which made it perfect for Chocolate to conceal himself so you wouldn’t know he was even there until it was too late.

Dillon stood there in a daze. In an instant it seemed like the entire playground went silent. You could hear a pin drop at that moment. The slight breeze, which before now was not even noticeable, seemed like a torrent at that moment.

“You jerk!” screamed Sarah—another sixth grader with medium length brown hair, and one of Dillon’s best friends—as she moved closer to Jason and Dillon.

Jason merely laughed.

Dillon started walking toward the yard.

“What are you doing?” asked Sarah as she grabbed his arm. “You’re not seriously thinking about going in there are you?” she pressed.

Dillon pulled his arm away. “I have to,” he said as he turned to look her in the eyes.

“Why?”

“I … I don’t know,” he responded hesitantly. “But I need to get that watch back.”

“Why don’t you just wait until after school and go ask Miss Kettle to get it

back for you instead of risking your life for a stupid broken watch you found in the forest?" Sarah reasoned.

"I can't wait. I can't lose it. What if the dog get's it first?" His voice was verging on the edge of desperation. His tone stopped Sarah in her tracks for a moment.

Jason laughed again as he began to walk away. "You're as stupid as you look Hunt!"

Sarah snapped her head around and gave Jason a cold look. He sneered at her, waved his hand dismissively, and continued walking. "Come on guys," he said to the rest of his posse. They hesitated, unsure of what they should do. "I said come on!" he reiterated forcefully. That was enough to get them going.

By the time Sarah looked back, Dillon was halfway to the fence. The other kids who, a moment earlier were hanging out with him on the Jungle Gym, looked to one another for a second and then began to follow. Sarah ran to catch up with him.

"Dillon!" she whispered emphatically as they got closer to the fence.

Dillon quickly waved his hand in a downward motion indicating that he wanted her to be quiet. He stood by the fence for a moment and listened. Everyone was deadly silent. The only sound that could be heard was the light breeze that moved through the trees and brush of Miss Kettle's yard, ruffling the leaves and branches as it went.

Dillon grabbed the top of the chain-linked fence. Sarah touched his shoulder. He turned and met her eyes, noting the concern he could see in them. "It'll be okay," he whispered to her. With that, he quickly leaped over the fence and into the yard. Every kid watching held their breath, not daring to make a sound.

Dillon made his way quickly across the small clearing that led to the edge of the trees and bushes which covered Miss Kettle's yard. He then crouched down and slipped under the closest overhang of branches and disappeared under the overgrowth. As silent as he could he maneuvered through the yard, trying to remember roughly where he saw the watch go down. As he snuck along he was careful to listen for any sound that Chocolate might make. He noted some deadfall under the trees and picked up a one inch thick branch that was about

three feet long, just in case. He came through the thick brush and noted a large doghouse in front of him and to the right. He scanned the yard to see if he could spot the dog anywhere. All was clear. As he was repositioning himself he suddenly heard some movement coming from within the doghouse. He froze, not daring to even breathe. He waited for what seemed an eternity, but nothing happened. No dog. *He's probably sleeping*, Dillon thought. *I hope he's sleeping*!

As he continued to scan around he noted the glint of an object as the sun reflected off of it. It was the watch! Dillon's best guess was that the watch had cleared the trees and landed about ten feet from the edge of the brush into the yard; five feet from the entrance to the doghouse.

Man. Jason has a great arm! he thought to himself. *That kid should really focus on using it for good not evil.* Dillon shook his head in order to focus his attention back to the task at hand. *Get the watch*, he thought to himself. *Get the watch.*

He kneeled at the edge of the tree-line, reached down and grabbed a handful of dead leaves, and sprinkled them lightly so that he could get a sense of the wind direction. The wind was blowing back the way he had come, which meant that it was blowing, more-or-less, away from the doghouse.

Dillon knew that he had to act sooner than later. Slowly he began to creep toward the watch, walking in a crouched position, watching carefully where he placed each foot as he moved. He was almost there when he noticed a slight change in his environment. He felt the wind shift ever-so-slightly as the hair on the back of his head moved in that direction; the direction of the doghouse. His heart started to pound, threatening to burst from his chest. Then he heard it. The low growl that drained the blood from his face. Slowly, he looked up to see Chocolate crouched low in his doghouse and starring at him with those deep brown eyes, barring his shiny white teeth.

Dillon's hand was so close to the watch. A few more inches and he would have it. Chocolate slowly started to emerge from the doghouse. Dillon grasped the stick tightly in his hand while he moved his other hand over and grabbed the watch. Chocolate's growl grew more intense. Slowly, Dillon began to stand. "Hey boy," he said in a steady tone. "How are you today?" Chocolate barked.

“Easy boy,” said Dillon with his hand out. “You want the stick?” he asked as he began to wave it. Chocolate still growled and issued a bark. Dillon waved the stick a little more emphatically. “Wanna play? Come on boy … come on …” he said in the most playful voice he could muster.

Dillon started to back away slowly. He didn’t think the dog was going for it. He still waved the stick and tried to get Chocolate’s attention with it. The dog crouched lower and began to stalk in. Dillon now knew that he had but one option: run. Before he was able to turn, Chocolate leaped at him, his canine fangs leading the way. Dillon twisted and turned around the nearest tree; the dog landed with a thud, tearing at the bark where Dillon was just a moment earlier.

The young boy pumped his legs as fast as he could, knowing that the ferocious dog was coming at him without mercy. He could hear the dog break around the tree in pursuit but he didn’t dare to even turn his head and look. His only hope, he knew, was to get to the fence.

Chocolate tore through the brush like a dog possessed! He was almost on top of Dillon when his name rang through the air as a large stick land right near him. Chocolate stopped to take note. “Over here Chocolate!” yelled Sarah again, standing about fifteen feet from him.

Dillon glanced over to see his friend standing there and noted that she had just bought him some time. Sarah ran as soon as the dog noticed her. It was confused for a moment as it stared between the two, as if wondering which one would make a juicier snack. It decided to keep going for Dillon as it again turned toward him and resumed the chase.

Dillon could see the fence and the others standing safely on the other side. They began to cheer when they saw him and Sarah, then their cheer turned to shrieks of horror as they saw Chocolate in hot pursuit coming through the small clearing that led to the fence.

Dillon knew he was going to be hard-pressed to make it so he turned to meet the charging dog and got his stick up just in time. Chocolate bit down on the branch and began to tear it back and forth. It was all Dillon could do to keep the stick in his hands. He knew he had to make a break over the fence, so he let go of the stick and twisted his body, placing a hand on the fence and leaped. The

dog tore at the stick a little more then threw it to the ground and lunged toward Dillon. The boy curled up his legs as Chocolate snapped his huge maw at him. The dog managed to grab some of the fabric on Dillon's pant leg, but it wasn't enough to get a good hold, and it tore free. Dillon cleared the fence and landed on the ground with a thud, feeling some of the wind being blown from his lungs.

He lay there for a moment, trying to get his breath back. When he managed to look up he saw the faces of his friends staring down at him with huge smiles, cheering, and offering to help him up.

Dillon quickly sat up onto his elbows then glance over to Sarah who was just getting up from where she was kneeling after jumping the fence. Chocolate was barking as ferociously as he could and ramming his head into the fence.

"That was awesome!" yelled Tyler Jones, a scrawny ten year old who always loved hanging out with Dillon on the playground and being part of his adventures. The others agreed enthusiastically.

Dillon nodded and shook off the loose grass that clung to his clothes. Sarah marched over and punched him in the arm as hard as she could. "Ow!" he complained. "What was that for?"

"Oh I think you know!" she replied. "You know … you know … you know!" she yelled. "That was the stupidest thing you have ever done!"

Dillon was quiet, and so were the rest of the kids. In fact, the silence was so awkward that the others started to slink away muttering one excuse or another. Sarah's angry eyes bore into him. From his pocket Dillon produced the watch and smiled.

"Was it worth it?" Sarah asked, her anger not abated at all. "Is that worth your life?" she yelled, pointing an angry finger at the watch.

"I think you're exaggerating a little," Dillon responded as he put the watch back in his pocket. "And yes … I can't explain it, but this was worth it."

Sarah looked at him in disbelief, snorted, and stormed away. By then Chocolate had calmed down and slunk back into the tree-line, heading for his doghouse again.

Dillon was left there by himself; the soft, cool wind brushing against his face. *Why was this so important?* he thought to himself. After a moment more he

merely shrugged the thought away and headed toward the school as he knew the lunch break was about to end.

4

DUST VALLEY DESERT OASIS RESORT

After a few days, Dillon's relationship with Sarah was still broken. She had refused to hang out the last couple of days, or even talk to him for that matter. He had trouble figuring out why she was so angry. He knew he had to repair whatever damage had been done, but he didn't quite know how to go about it.

After school on the third day after the incident in Miss Kettle's yard, as Dillon walked onto the school bus, he noticed that none of Sarah's other friends had sat down with her yet. *This is my chance*, he thought to himself.

As he walked up to her seat he noticed that she was quick to turn her face away from him and stare out the window, pretending not to see him. "Is this seat taken?" he asked innocently.

She glanced up at him with a blank expression that he found hard to read. "I really need to talk to you," he was quick to add, feeling as though he was on the edge of his chance at any reconciliation. "Please," he pleaded.

"Fine," she replied in a cold tone.

Dillon smiled and sat down. "Listen," he started, "I'm really sorry I upset you the other day. It was stupid of me and I—"

"It's okay," Sarah interrupted him, managing a little smile. "You just get me so angry sometimes with your crazy ideas."

Dillon was shocked! He didn't think it would be that easy. "We're okay then?" he asked.

“Ya. You know me. I can’t stay mad at you forever.”

Dillon smiled. “Thanks!”

“So what’s so special about that watch anyway?” Sarah asked.

Dillon took it out of his backpack. “I don’t know,” he replied. “There’s just something about it.” He opened it up and showed Sarah the inside with the faded face and the missing hands.

She took it and looked it over. “It just looks like a piece of junk,” she stated. She looked at the back and noticed the letters *JTS*. “JTS?” she asked. “What’s that mean?”

“I don’t know. It could be anything?”

“You said you found this in the forest beside your house?”

“Ya. In a really weird spot too. I can’t for the life of me think why it was where it was,” Dillon stated.

Sarah handed the watch back. “Well, it is kind of cool finding something that’s that old and worn.” She smiled. “You’ve always been into old stuff.”

Dillon put the watch back in his pack and smiled at his friend. He knew that she would come around.

He glanced out the window as he zipped up the bag and noticed his older sister Claire with Jeff Hogan, a tall gangly fourteen year old with light brown shaggy hair. He wore tattered jeans and a tank top. Claire smiled and laughed at something Jeff had said while putting her hand on his shoulder. She leaned over and gave him a kiss before turning and rushing to the bus.

As she walked down the aisle Dillon looked up and gave her a quick smirk.

“What’s that for nerd?” she asked disdainfully.

“Nothing. Can’t I smile at my sister?”

Ah … no,” she replied as she moved passed him to join some of her friends who saved her a seat near the back of the bus.

“Wow. She’s rude isn’t she?” Sarah noted.

Dillon shrugged, not really caring too much about Claire’s attitude. “It’s just how she is. But now I know something that she doesn’t.”

“Oh ya. What’s that?”

“She doesn’t know that I know she’s dating Jeff Hogan,” he replied with a

smile.

Sarah laughed and shook her head, always amused at the interplay that happens between Dillon and his siblings.

THAT NIGHT DINNER *WAS* AWESOME! THE ROAST CHICKEN WAS PERFECTLY DONE with the skin at just the right crispiness level! Dillon loved roast chicken. And those baked potatoes! Even the salad was good which was always a bonus, especially for someone who didn't like eating vegetables that much. There was even a rumour that Mom had made cheesecake!

Mom and Dad always provided for the family, but sometimes the food selection was limited due to finances. Special meals were always made to celebrate special occasions and today's meal was definitely special, which made Dillon wonder what was up.

"So what's the special occasion?" Dillon finally asked, as he went in for another helping of that delicious chicken.

"Nothing much," replied Dad. "I just thought I would treat the family tonight."

"Riiiiight … " replied Jordan, Dillon's older brother, in a skeptical tone.

Dad smiled back. "Oh … and I just wanted everyone to know that we just might be going on a family vacation this year after all."

Dillon's jaw dropped to the floor!

"How is that possible?" asked Claire.

"Well, it turns out that I won some tickets to Dust Valley Desert Oasis Resort —the same place Aunt Clarissa, Uncle Gerald, and their kids went a couple years ago—from filling out an on-line survey for a stats-gathering agency. I don't remember doing the survey, but it was probably done a while ago. Everything's been verified so I know it's not a scam," Dad explained.

"That's great! Jordan exclaimed. "Uncle Gerald said that the place was awesome for hiking, biking, canoeing, and all sorts of other outdoor activities."

"Don't forget about the girls," Gwen said in a sly tone.

Jordan’s face turned red. “Oh, shut up!” he snapped back.

“Jordan! Don’t use that language!” Mom interjected.

Jordan slumped back in his chair, clearly not happy about his little sister’s observation while Claire and Gwen chuckled to themselves.

“So when are we planning to go?” asked Dillon. “Summer time is just around the corner.”

“Really!” Claire stated in a snotty tone. “We’re barely halfway through spring and you think Summer is ‘right around the corner,’” she ended as she made the air-quote sign with her fingers.

“What?” Dillon shrugged innocently. “To me that is ‘right around the corner,’” he air-quoted back. In truth, however, Dillon didn’t know how he was going to handle the wait. He was one of the worst ones in the family for having patience right before a big family trip. He knew he would have to find something to keep his mind off of it.

Dad just shook his head and snickered at his children’s banter. “Well,” he started, after Dillon and Claire had quieted, “the tickets are really specific in regard to the timing. Fortunately, my boss already gave me those days off in order for us to take the vacation,” Dad explained.

“And that day is … ?” Claire prodded.

“It just happens to be July sixth to the seventeenth.”

“That’s awesome!” Dillon exclaimed. “That’s right after Independence Day! So we get to enjoy that weekend with our friends and then we’re off for a wicked family vacation!”

Mom smiled at his exuberant display as she scooped a little bit more salad onto Gwen’s plate. Gwen frowned at Mom.

“Sorry guys, but I need to ask the obvious question. How are we going to afford the spending money?” Claire reasoned.

Mom and Dad shared knowing looks and grinned at one another.

“That’s the best part,” Dad said. “The resort is all-inclusive and the tickets come with a two thousand dollar voucher that can be used for any activities or merchandise on the property.”

“What!” Jordan yelled, not able to contain his excitement. “It sounds too

good to be true."

"Always the skeptic," Mom said, as she gave Jordan that motherly look which reproved the kids from time to time.

"Well I think it's awesome!" Gwen responded with a massive grin.

"It is awesome," Dad replied. "And much needed for our family."

With that, the Hunt family continued to chatter away about the prospects for fun and relaxation that this vacation was going to bring for their family.

Dillon's mind was transported far away as he began to imagine the great adventures he was about to have at the Dust Valley Desert Oasis Resort. It was going to be a time to remember. More so than he even realized.

DILLON LOOKED AT THE WATCH. HE HELD IT OPEN IN HIS HAND. EVERYTHING around him was dark. The only thing he could see was the watch. It had a single hand attached to it which was spinning clockwise. It spun and spun and spun—faster and faster and faster. He began to get mesmerized by the spinning action when suddenly he was ripped from his daze by a loud hiss.

He whipped around and lurched backwards as a large snake head lunged toward him, fangs bared. He stumbled and threw his hands up as the thing came in.

Dillon opened his eyes, gasping for breath! He looked at the ceiling of his bedroom and saw the lights from the street dancing there that reflected through the prism that hung by his window.

He sat up, turned on the night light that was on his night stand, and grabbed the watch that sat there. He opened it up and noted that there still weren't any hands attached to it.

"That was weird," Dillon commented to himself as he closed up the watch and laid back down. The dream seemed so real to him. He had real-seeming dreams before, but for some reason he felt that this was different. He just didn't know why.

He turned the light off, laid down again, and closed his eyes; hoping this

time that he would have more pleasant dreams.

5

JOHN TAYLOR SEBASTIAN

Dillon flew down the track, dust being kicked up by the bikes in front of him. He drifted around the corner and noticed that he was catching up with the leaders. This was the last bike race of the year, and he promised himself that he would finish in the top three. Even though his parents couldn't afford the nicer bikes that most of the others used, he was still able to keep pace with them through his shear determination and skill.

BMX racing had been a big part of his life for the last four years, and he loved it. He loved the adrenalin, the speed, and the air he was able to get when going over the jumps.

He could hear his Mom screaming for him to go as he soared through the air. He landed and pumped his legs furiously, desperately trying to overtake the biker who was in third position. They were so close together. Dillon could feel his legs burning with every thrust down on the pedals.

He and the other biker raced around the last corner leading to the home stretch. They could see the bikers who were in first and second place; they were only a few feet ahead of them and there were only two more jumps and a short straight until the end.

They came over the first jump and Dillon managed to land in third place and was within striking distance of second, maybe even first. He pumped harder and harder. They went up the last jump. Dillon could see the finish line. All four of them were so close as they soared through the air; they could almost touch each

other if they just reached out. When he came down his landing was off. He hit the track hard and his front tire lost its traction and slid out from under him. As the others sped toward the finish line Dillon was thrown from his bike and slammed hard onto the dirt track. The momentum carried him for a few feet as he rolled and slid to a halt. There was a collective sound of shock that came from the crowd as he hit the ground. He could hear his Mom shriek.

He coughed and wheezed as he tried to get some air back into his lungs. As he got to his knees he saw other bikers landing the jump and whipping past him. A few of them landed so close that he thought they were going to crash into him, but luckily that didn't happen.

After what seemed a long moment he climbed to his feet and the crowd erupted into cheers. He could see the medical staff running toward him but tried to wave them off. He knew they weren't going to stop so, before they could get to him, he picked up his bike, mounted it, and road to the line. As he crossed over and finished the race he didn't feel so bad anymore about coming in dead last.

THE WEEK AND A HALF AFTER THE END OF SCHOOL WAS PRETTY UNEVENTFUL. HE hung out with Sarah a few times and their other friend on the street, Evan. They had some pretty decent times together, but what all of them were really interested in was the trip his family was taking to Dust Valley Desert Oasis Resort.

"Look here!" Sarah exclaimed, as she pointed to the computer screen.

Dillon, their friend Evan, and her were all hunched over the table staring intently at the screen. They had decided that it would be cool to do some research on Dust Valley Desert Oasis Resort since it wasn't a really well known attraction yet. Unfortunately, it was too expensive for the family budget to have ever allowed them to go; that is, until Dad won the trip.

"It looks like this is an awesome place for trail riding, swimming, and they have a ton of other cool activities," said Sarah, trying to keep her voice down as

she certainly didn't want to call down the wrath of the librarian upon them.

"Ya, that is cool," replied Dillon. "I also found, on the site that I was looking at earlier, that the resort is in the middle of the desert, but where it is, is nestled by a lush lake with palm trees, lots of green grass, and all sorts of vegetation. No one knows how this is possible, but there are many theories behind the mystery."

Sarah glanced at her friend with interest, silently prodding him to go on. Evan perked up as well as soon as Dillon mentioned "mysteries."

"Well," Dillon started after clearing his throat. "Some believe that there was a magic spell put on the place by some sort of creature that helped a lost Indian tribe: the Tokala tribe. They say that the tribe was forced into the desert by a band of US soldiers back in the 1800's. The survivors narrowly escaped being killed and found this valley. They were all but about to die of thirst when suddenly they saw a being show up whose robes were so white that they appeared to glow. Whatever it was shook the earth and water began to come up from below. Soon after, vegetation began to grow and the place revitalized. Apparently many geologists have searched around for an entrance to an underground spring, but no one has found it except maybe one."

Dillon paused in his story telling for effect until Sarah finally burst out, "Who!"

He smiled before beginning his tale again. "I say *maybe* because there, apparently, was a famed and wealthy archeologist named John Taylor Sebastian who, in 2016 thoroughly explored the grounds. When he was about to give up it was reported that he disappeared, but no one saw him leave the area."

Sarah gasped. Evan's mouth hung open.

"That's way more interesting than the site I found," she replied.

"Ya, the news report I found said that his car and all the belongings were discovered at the place he was renting," he continued. "There was a cryptic note stating that he had found something significant, but there were no details as to where he was going. His field pack with his equipment was also missing. Presumably, he took it with him to wherever he was going."

"What did the note say exactly?" Sarah asked.

"I don't know, as there was no information about it from the sources I

checked because no one knows where the note went. Some even doubt if it actually really existed."

The three of them sat in silence for a moment, trying to digest the creepy story.

Finally Evan asked, "So if John Taylor Sebastian actually found the entrance to the source of whatever is causing the Oasis to thrive, then that means he most likely died on his quest?"

All Dillon could do was nod slightly at Evan's logic.

"Cool!" Evan exclaimed in amazement. Sarah punched him in the arm and scowled.

Dillon laughed. "I think the whole tale about the tribe fleeing for their lives, and the mysterious supernatural event that saved them was probably just made up. I checked other sources which suspect that the Oasis is only about five years old or so. At least that's when the resort opened. The story was probably fabricated in order to bring more visitors. It's pretty good marketing if you ask me.

"Then what about John Taylor Sebastian?" Evan asked. "Is that true?"

Dillon looked at them both, suddenly serious again. "Actually, that part is true. And the part about the other scientists trying to find the source of what gives the Oasis life is true too. There has been no record of this place existing until about five years ago as I said. This naturally piqued the curiosity of the scientific community who have had limited excursions, but nothing significant, as I said, has been found."

"What do you mean by *limited*?" Evan asked as he was really getting drawn into the story now.

"Well the place is actually private property," Dillon replied. "It's owned by the Tokala Indian tribe—the same tribe from the story—who has allowed access to the premises to certain researchers, but they have not given complete permission to do what they want. The band also claims not to know how the Oasis began, which is why they let scientists come and investigate. They are probably interested in finding out why the Oasis is thriving so well."

"That makes sense," Sarah interjected. "They do have a business to run after

all. And, even though they are probably curious, too much snooping around might disrupt things for them."

She looked at Dillon right in the eyes. "You have to promise me that you won't do anything stupid like going to look for this *entrance*," Sarah stated sternly.

Dillon laughed again. "If most people—scientists—spend months or a couple of years trying to find this secret source, then how do you think I'll find it in two weeks?"

"I don't know," Sarah responded as she sat back trying to digest the story. "But you tend to find things that others don't. It's actually kind of creepy."

Dillon smiled, trying to reassure her without actually saying anything because, truth be told, he does end up stumbling upon things that others don't. It's really not his fault he thought to himself.

Despite what the origin of the Oasis was, the one fact remained: no one has ever found out when and where it came from. No one except maybe this John guy, and he's been missing for a while now.

6

THE ARROWHEAD

Dillon's hand reached toward the symbol that was etched into the cold stone wall. His fingers quivered slightly as he rubbed them across the carving. There was writing surrounding the image on the wall, but he couldn't make out the language. The image was a pentagram boxed in by a square, and in the center of the pentagram was what appeared to be an eye.

Dillon felt a chill as a blast of wind came down the tunnel, causing the flame on his torch to waver a little. He would have used the light on his phone, but the battery died out a few minutes earlier, which was weird given the fact that it should have lasted longer than that as he had a fresh charge.

He felt a slight tug on the arm of his shirt. When he glanced over he saw his sister, Gwen, standing beside him; her eyes showing that she was distressed. "I want to get out of here," she said to him in a soft tone, a tear trickling down her cheek.

"We will Gwen," Dillon replied. Truthfully, however, he wasn't sure how he would be able to get them out. But he couldn't let his sister know his doubts. Whatever it took, he knew he would have to do what he could to keep them alive.

As they stood there looking at the carving on the wall, trying to make sense of it, they both heard the sound of something coming from down the tunnel. They jerked their heads around, Dillon waved the torch in front of him so he could get as much light as he could. From the shadows he saw movement

coming toward them. Gwen tightened her grip on her brother's arm. Dillon reflexively went for a weapon, but quickly realized that the only thing he had that would help was the torch.

Suddenly something jumped from the shadows. It hurled its bulbous body toward them. Gwen shrieked. Dillon pushed his sister aside and the creature sailed between them. Dillon slammed into the side of the tunnel opposite Gwen. He looked to where the creature had landed and, as the light of the torch touched the area, he noticed a large spider-like thing quickly spinning around. It was about the size of a soccer ball, had grotesque pincers protruding out of its maw, and a large hairy bulbous body. It had two massive lidless eyes and made a strange clicking sound as it moved its head side-to-side. It flinched and shied away from Dillon as though its eyes were incredibly sensitive to the light.

Gwen yelped again as she saw the creature in the full brightness of the torch. Immediately, despite the torchlight, it seemed to hone in on her and pounced. Dillon launched forward and swatted it out of the air with the torch. It made a screech as it hit the wall hard and slumped to the ground. Its many legs flailed wildly as it tried to right itself. Gwen leaped away as Dillon went in and hit it again and again and again until it stopped moving.

"Wha … What is that?" Gwen asked, wiping away tears from her eyes.

"I don't know," replied Dillon as he poked at it with his foot. "But let's not wait around to find out." With that, he grabbed Gwen by the arm and started off down the tunnel the opposite way the creature had come. As soon as they started off, they could hear more movement coming toward them, lots of movement. And that clicking! Gwen tried hard to suppress her fear but couldn't. "There's more coming!" she screamed.

Dillon pulled his sister down the passage as fast as he could. The sound of the monster's many legs was getting louder as the creatures were closing in, and the clicking they made was terrifying. As Dillon and Gwen ran they could hear the sound of running water coming from up ahead. The tunnel dipped and turned, obviously not being man made, but rather formed by some natural process from long ago. The sound of the water was getting louder, almost drowning out the sound of the creature's advance. They rounded another corner

and the tunnel opened into a large cavern. They found themselves on a wide ledge that was about ten feet long and ended in a shear drop into darkness. The cavern was dimly lit; its walls sparkling as though the two were looking at the night sky except that the sky was all around them.

Dillon didn't have time to enjoy the scenery, however, as the bulbous beasts came charging around the corner. Dillon and Gwen backed toward the ledge as Dillon held his torch as high as he could out in front of him as far as he could, trying to illuminate as much area as possible. The first creatures who came out of the tunnel immediately flinched and slowed as the light hit their eyes. They still seemed interested in the pursuit, but moved cautiously as the brightness of the torch stung their eyes.

One of the creatures leaped at them, but Dillon was quick to knock it out of the way with the torch. Sparks flew as he made contact with it and it issued a horrifying shriek as it tumbled from the ledge and into the dark below.

Gwen wept as the others, about ten in number now, slowly approached, pincers snapping. "Get away from us!" Gwen shouted, picking up a nearby rock and tossing it at the nearest monster. She hit it in the eye and it shrieked as it backed a little.

"What are we gonna do Dillon?" asked an agitated Gwen.

"There's only one thing we can do Gwen," replied Dillon in as even a tone as he could muster. He looked down at his sister, picked her up in his arms, and leaped from the ledge.

"DILLON! DILLON!" GWEN NUDGED HER BROTHER.

Dillon moved his head slightly, his eyes fluttering open. Staring at him were the bright eyes and beaming smile of his little sister. He looked around groggily and realized he was in the back of the Hunt family van as they were travelling to Dust Valley Desert Oasis Resort.

"Wow, that was a crazy dream," he whispered to himself.

"It must have been!" Gwen exclaimed. "You were moving around pretty

good. And mumbling stuff."

"Oh yeah … like what?" Dillon asked, a look of curiosity splayed across his face.

"I don't know exactly," Gwen stated. "It was kinda hard to make out. I think it had something to do with spiders. I thought you were going to wake up screaming actually."

Dillon looked at her seriously for a moment and then smiled; his usual disarming smile. "Well it's a good thing that didn't happen."

Gwen giggled.

The car trip to Dust Valley Desert Oasis Resort was about eight hours from home and, as far as car trips went, it was pretty standard for the Hunt family, except for Dillon's dream. His imagination was always exceptionally active, but when he went to bed he didn't normally have such intense dreams. He thought that maybe it was all the excitement and anticipation waiting for the family vacation.

Jordan, as always, had his face stuck in a game of some sort; whether it was DS, phone, tablet, or the like. The only sounds you would get out of him were the sounds of victory ("Yeah!!!! I told you, you were going down!), or defeat ("Ahhhhh! … What the … ! … Oh come on!). After Dillon woke up Gwen would notice him marking down something in his book every time Jordan made one of his outbursts.

"What are you doing?" she leaned over and whispered.

"It's a social experiment," he replied. "I'm marking down how many times he loses verses how many times he wins."

She smiled and nodded. "How's he doing?"

"Not very good I'm afraid."

Gwen giggled and then went back to playing one of her games on her tablet.

Claire had her face securely planted in her phone, making sure she was able to keep up on the latest drama with her friends. After all, she was fourteen and, it was rumoured, that the world would stop spinning if she missed something that happened on social media! Once in a while she would grimace and complain when the van hit a dead spot in the cell service, and then resumed again when

the service came back.

Dillon, however, continued to read the information he had found on Dust Valley Desert Oasis Resort. As the van continued to roll along down the highway on their lengthy trip, Dillon noticed a distinctive change in the scenery which caught his attention. The landscape went from lush green forests and mountain scenes, to flat arid land. He started to notice areas with large plateaus high in the sky, shrub brush, even small canyons. He saw a variety of different wildlife: antelope, large birds of prey, and even a few wild horses. The sky was vast, strikingly blue, and lit up with bright sunshine. As they drove further to their goal the ground turned to a baked reddish-yellowish color.

A couple of hours after their last rest break the van began to slow again as Dad decided that it was prudent to make another quick stop for a restroom break at one of the Exxon stations. Apparently he also needed more coffee in his system as well. Mom, as always, reiterated about ten times the need for all of the kids to go to the restroom as there may not be another stop for a while. As per usual, Jordan complained that he had to get off of his gaming system.

“You know, Jordan,” Dad said, “there is a pause button on your system for a reason.” Jordan mumbled something incoherent and put his game down.

As Dillon jumped out of the car the heat hit him! It felt like he had just opened the oven to check on the chocolate chip cookies! *Man*, he thought to himself, *I didn’t realize it was going to be this hot!*

The restroom was one of those outdoor ones where you had to get the key from the attendant inside the station. As per usual Jordan managed to get the key before Dillon could and occupied the restroom first. As Dillon waited outside he noted the nice scenery of trees and brush that was around the gas station. The station was nestled up beside a hill that was filled with the hardy desert shrubs. The wind blew slightly, but there was no way it was going to lessen the heat. In fact, the wind made it seem hotter! Not refreshing at all.

As Dillon was waiting for Jordon to finish he saw something move out of the corner of his eye. He turned to see a small prairie dog standing on the pavement just outside the tree-line looking at him. Dillon smiled. “Here boy,” he said as he stooped down, trying not to appear intimidating. The prairie dog looked around a

bit, came toward him a few feet and then darted back into the forest when the restroom door swung open.

Jordan looked down at his brother. “What are you doing?” he asked.

Dillon stood. “Nothing,” he replied. “Just trying to make a friend.”

Jordan laughed. “It’s all yours,” he said motioning to the restroom. “I’ll see you back at the car bro.”

Dillon nodded. When he came out a couple of minutes later he glanced over to where the prairie dog was, just to see if his little friend was there. It was gone, but a small glint caught his eye. He walked over and, on the ground roughly where the squirrel had been, was a small steel arrow head. It was plain looking except that the middle portion of it, on one side, had three bumps formed there, almost like nubs, and there was a tiny hole in the middle that was barely noticeable. The nub nearest the point was positioned almost in the middle of the head, the next one was in the middle off to one side, and the one positioned near the end of the head was off to the other side.

“Come on Dillon,” he heard his Dad holler.

The call was enough to pull him from his thoughts. He quickly scooped up the arrow head and rushed back to the van.

As soon as Dillon was buckled in he started examining his find. Aside from the other features he already noted when he first looked at the item, he also noticed that there was a small hole drilled through the middle of it. *That’s weird,* he thought to himself.

“Whatcha got there?” Gwen asked as she noticed that Dillon was handling something.

“Oh nothing,” Dillon responded. “Just something I found at the gas station.” He said it like it was no big deal, but deep down inside he had that same strange feeling that he had with the watch. He felt this arrowhead was important somehow, but he didn’t know why. This feeling was irrational but he knew it was somehow right. It was actually starting to frighten him.

DEREK WATCHED THE YOUNG BOY RUN TO THE VAN AS HE CONTINUED TO FUEL UP his car. He noted how Dillon had come out of the restroom and then observed, with surprise, as something caught the boys attention. *He found the arrow head I just placed there!* he thought to himself. He was amazed at the power of Dillon's apparent observational skills. It was quite impressive. There had to be some sort of inherent ability to observe changes in his surroundings which displayed itself in finding things that others might miss, he reasoned to himself. *Although*, he thought, *it wouldn't be the first time he had seen something weird that couldn't be explained by any science that they knew of.*

He finished filling up his tank, grabbed the receipt off the pump, and climbed back in his car. Jake was sitting in the passenger seat this time.

"Do you think it wise to be giving these items to the boy?" Derek asked.

Jake merely shrugged. "I'm sure we could get them back some way or other if we had to. Besides, we're running out of options and we need someone who will be able to find the entrance for us."

"It is pretty desperate to leave our fortunes in the hands of a twelve year old boy," Derek reasoned.

"We are desperate!" Jake snapped back. After he calmed himself he said, "It's been a while since we have had any breaks in this case and, with the changes in Dillon's grandfather, we had to go with Dillon."

"Why not his Dad or any of his other siblings?" asked Derek.

Jake shook his head. "No, we observed his Dad and he just doesn't seem to have the gift. His brother and older sister are a lot different than Dillon and don't exhibit any of the traits of their grandfather either."

"And what about his younger sister?" Derek asked with intrigue.

Jake paused for a moment before he spoke, almost as if to collect his thoughts. "Even if his younger sister does exhibit the same kind of qualities she's too young to help us out with this particular exhibition," he said at length.

"And a twelve year old boy isn't?" Derek asked skeptically.

All he got in return from Jake was a slight smirk as he turned the ignition in the car and pulled away from the gas station as they continued to head for Dust Valley Desert Oasis Resort.

7

THE INFORMATION CENTER

The Hunt family van rolled smoothly through the hills and valleys of the desolate desert. Cacti were scattered throughout the landscape, and vultures could be seen high up in the sky circling the terrain, waiting to pounce upon any of the small creatures they could see (living or dead) that were sprinkled throughout the arid land.

Jordan, Claire, and Gwen were all sleeping by this time as they were pretty worn out by the long drive and the monotonous view. Dillon, however, stared intently out the window imagining some grand adventure where he was being chased by creatures that have been hidden for years amongst the many caves and valleys that made the rocky desert interesting. *This would be an awesome spot to explore!* he thought to himself.

"Hey Dad. I don't suppose there are any rest stops coming up where we can get out at and take a look around?" he asked.

"Unfortunately not," Dad replied. "Besides, we are actually almost there."

Dillon looked out the window skeptically. "Okay," he replied dejectedly.

"Don't be like that," Mom reprimanded gently. "There are going to be tons of places for you to explore when we get to the resort. It won't be long now … probably within the hour," she stated.

About twenty minutes later Dillon felt the van slowing. He looked out the front window and noticed that dad seemed to be pulling over to an information center. He looked at Dillon in the rear view mirror and smirked. "Maybe we can

afford a quick stop."

"Awesome!" responded Dillon.

"But we're not exploring," Dad was quick to add. "We're just here to see if there's more information on the place than what they already sent to us."

"Sounds good to me," Dillon replied, sitting up all the straighter now and acting as though new energy had been injected into him.

The other kids woke up as soon as the van was pulling into the parking lot. The only one who didn't seem interested in checking out the info center was Claire. She just seemed more interested in staying with the van and "chilling" but Dad made her get out anyway and go inside with them. There was no way he was going to leave the van on in order to keep the AC running, and he couldn't leave her in a vehicle by herself in this desert heat.

Dillon and Gwen were the first to burst through the doors. As they did they were immediately struck with the sound of multiple chimes at different pitches going off in a musical pattern that sounded almost harp-like. They both stopped and looked for the source. There, at the top of the door were hand-crafted wooden pipes which were strung together with thin pieces of cord weaved through each pipe at different intervals. Hanging from the pipes were small hammers that moved and struck the strings as the door swung the chime freely when it was opened. The pipes also had holes of different sizes in them which whistled as they moved and air passed through them.

"Cool!" Dillon and Gwen both exclaimed at the same time.

The main room was circular with lots of different kinds of stuffed critters that were native to the area mounted on the walls and some standing on pedestals. Gwen was in awe. She looked around the large room and tried to take it all in. As she turned her head she jumped back and yelped as her face was inches from a grizzly looking stuffed coyote that was barring its fangs. Dad chuckled and put his arm around her when he came through the door. Dillon, Jordan, and Mom were already checking out the rest of the info center.

"It's okay honey," he said reassuringly. "It's just a stuffed animal, like the ones you have at home."

Slowly she reached over and touched the thing on the nose. It felt warm. She

quickly pulled her hand away and stared at it in the eyes. “It’s eyes look so *real*,” Gwen said as she further inspected the creature.

“Some say that you can feel old Charlie here bore through your soul when he looks at you,” came a deep voice from the side. Dad and Gwen both looked over to see an older native man, with long jet black hair that was streaked with silver. His face was wrinkled and weathered from years of living under the hot desert sun. He wore tattered jeans, a plain baby blue t-shirt, and a worn leather vest. His brown combat boots made a distinctive clunking sound as he strolled across the wooden floor toward the Hunts.

“But I personally think those people are crazy,” he finished with a slight chuckle. “The name’s Tom Tom,” he said to dad as he held out his hand.

Dad took his hand and gave him a firm shake. “I’m Bruce Hunt and this is my daughter Gwen.”

Tom Tom looked down at the little girl and smiled. “My friends call me Old Tom Tom,” he said as he stooped down and held out his hand to Gwen. She shied away, being a little unnerved by the stranger.

“Go on Gwen,” Dad prodded. “There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

She hesitantly stuck her hand out and shook his lightly.

“Now that’s better,” he said, standing up again. “What brings you folks here?”

“We’re just on our way to the resort,” Dad replied. “I imagine that most of the people you see around here are on their way there.”

Tom Tom nodded.

“Is there anything I can get you in particular?” he asked.

“No,” Dad said. “I think we’re just looking around.”

“Well, if you need anything just give me a shout,” Tom Tom said as he walked back over to the counter.

Gwen, Mom, and Claire headed over to the toys and activity area, while dad and Jordan wandered around the clothing area. Dillon found himself drawn to where they had the books. There were lots of interesting books on the local area. Some of the books had maps to places of interest, and there were brochures advertising many of the surrounding area activities.

As Dillon scanned the rack one book in particular caught his attention. It was a book on the archeologist John Taylor Sebastian!

“No way!” exclaimed Dillon to himself. He thumbed through the pages and read a sentence here and there. Then he flipped the book over to read the back. There was a picture of John Taylor Sebastian himself in the top corner. He was a middle-aged man—when this picture was taken at least—with light brown greying hair with a medium build. He wore a distinctive hat that appeared to be an Australian oilskin cowboy hat. He kind of resembled that archeologist from those popular movies that started in the 80’s that Mom and Dad always spoke about: Indiana Jones. The rest of his clothes appeared to be general everyday wear for outdoor activities: jeans, t-shirt, and hiking boots.

The back of the book read:

John Taylor Sebastian, an archeologist and philanthropist; a man with a dream and the passion to pursue it! He was a real life modern-day adventurer with his love of ancient mysteries and exciting lore.

His most remembered project was his search for the source of the Desert Oasis Resort’s underground springs which many think brought the area to life.

This book is exhilarating and full of information as to his search and eventual failure.
To this day, no one knows what exactly happened to John Taylor Sebastian and many rumors have been put forth to explain his strange and sudden disappearance, but none of these have ever been verified.

“It looks like you found a great read,” a deep voice said from beside Dillon.

Dillon jumped and almost dropped the book. He looked over to see Tom Tom standing beside him.

“Man, for a big guy, you’re pretty stealthy,” Dillon said as he collected himself.

Tom Tom offered a smile. “You interested in that stuff kid?” Tom Tom asked.

“Well … sort of,” he responded. “I mean … I have a thing for exploring new places and I’ve read a little bit about this guy.” He pointed to the picture on the back of the book. “It’s weird though,” he continued, “there’s not a lot of information of him on-line. I mean … one would think that a man with his reputation would be more well-known than he is.”

“Ya, you would think so wouldn’t you,” said Tom Tom. “Maybe someone doesn’t want people to know about him?” he asked with a quizzical look.

Dillon glanced at him questioningly. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“Oh nothing. Just the crazy ramblings of an old guy,” he said with a chuckle. “If you like that book, you should get this one too.” He reached onto another part of the rack and grabbed a smaller book with the title: “Creatures of the Desert.”

Dillon took the book in his hands and looked it over. It definitely piqued his curiosity. “Why would you think that I’d be interested in this?” he asked as he looked up at Tom Tom.

“Oh … I don’t know,” Tom Tom replied. “It just looks like the kind of thing a kid like you would enjoy. Aren’t there always interesting creatures in adventures?” With that, he turned and headed for the front counter once more.

Dillon flipped through the two books for a bit more and then rummaged through the rest of the rack; nothing else interested him. He had a strange feeling in his gut that these books would be a little more than interesting. He couldn’t explain why he felt that way. It was the same kind of sense he got when he found the watch and arrow head. Finally, Dad called to him which jolted him from his thoughts, and said that they were leaving.

“Just a minute Dad,” Dillon called back. He hurried to the counter and placed the books in front of Tom Tom.

“Is that everything?” Tom Tom asked.

“I don’t know,” Dillon responded. “You seem to know what I might be interested in. Any ideas?”

Tom Tom looked at Dillon for a moment then smiled. “I can’t think of anything right now, but we’re only a few miles from the resort if you realize that you need something.”

“Sounds good to me.” Dillon laid his money on the counter, received his change, and headed for the van. As he turned to go he noticed something out of the corner of his eye. He thought he saw, what looked like, the square surrounding a pentagram, with an eye in the center symbol that he had seen in his dream earlier that day. When he snapped his head around to look he didn’t see anything that looked like that. He scanned the area for a moment, but nothing. Nothing but that gut feel again.

“Everything okay?” asked Tom Tom in his deep voice.

“Ya … I just thought I saw … ”

“Saw what?” Tom Tom pressed.

Dillon gave himself a shake. *The long drive must be messing with my brain*. “Oh, nothing,” he replied, turning away from Tom Tom.

“Dillon! Come on!” Dad hollered as he came back into the info center.

“Coming!”

Dillon looked back and saw Tom Tom watching them as they left. He had a strange feeling that he’d be seeing the old man again; he just didn’t know why.

8

THE MYSTERIOUS SYMBOL

As soon as the Hunts came over the hill that led to the mouth of the valley they could see green grass for miles in all directions. There were tropical palm trees speckled throughout the valley, with beds of grass, lush bushes, and groves of umbrella trees. There were lots of creeks and ponds of water throughout the valley, and at the far end of the valley they could see the bright blue water of the lake shimmering in the sunlight. Right in the middle of the valley lay the resort with its numerous buildings, hotels, swimming pools, and lounge areas. The resort backed right onto the lake that Dillon had read about. On the outskirts of the resort village were a number of residential properties, convenience stores, and gas stations.

"The information I've read says that there's actually a small residential population here which is made up of the tribe members who own the land," Dillon said as they continued down the highway toward the main entrance to the resort.

"Apparently there are laws in place which prevent residential development from those outside the tribe. So most of the people who are here at any given time are tourists, or outside people they've brought in to help work at Desert Oasis.

"It says here in the pamphlet that, before the resort was built five years ago, there was an intense struggle for the rights of the land but, in the end, the courts ruled in favor of the small band of natives known as the Takala tribe," Dillon

explained. “After that, they petitioned lawmakers to enact laws around the restriction of buying and selling land in the resort area. Because of these laws the only full-time residents of the area were descendants of the original Takala tribe. They were the ones who built, own, and run the resort.”

“That’s really interesting,” said a sarcastic Jordan. “Lame! As if we were interested in that!” he exclaimed.

“Not everyone in life focuses on video games and girls,” Claire put in, which earned her a “death look” from her brother. Dillon looked at her in surprise. It wasn’t usually like Claire to stick up for him when Jordan was giving him the gears. She just smiled back as if to say she was only doing it because of the opportunity it gave her to bug her older brother.

“Well I find it interesting,” replied Mom, the eternal encourager.

Jordan rolled his eyes. “You think everything we say is ‘interesting,’” he muttered.

“What was that, Jordan?” his Dad asked, a warning look in his eyes.

“Nothing, Dad,” Jordan said, slinking lower in his seat.”

The van rolled up to the front gate where they were greeted by an attendant wearing a really flashy Hawaiian shirt, kakis shorts, and flip flop sandals. He was a younger native man, appearing to be in his early twenties, with medium length jet black hair, and an infectious smile.

“Welcome!” he said enthusiastically. “I’m Troy. The *gate keeper*.” He said that last bit about being the gate keeper in a lower voice, trying to sound dramatic, then smiled.

Dad was taken back a little bit by his enthusiasm. “Well, Troy the gate keeper. I’m Bruce Hunt and we have a reservation.” Dad handed him the reservation papers.

“Excellent!” Troy exclaimed. “You guy’s are going to have an awesome time. He looked further into the Van as he scanned the papers.

“Let me guess … You are obviously the lovely Lilly Hunt,” he said looking to Mom who smiled back. “And you, my man must be Dillon. And beside you has got to be your sister Gwen.” Gwen giggled. Looking way in the back of the van he noted the last of the Hunt kids. “Ah ha! You must be Claire.” Claire

blushed. “And the eldest Hunt kid,” he said in a sophisticated, terrible British accent, “Jordan.” Jordan nodded, not sure what to make of this weird guy.

“Wow! Gwen explained. “How did you know who we are?”

Troy smiled “It’s as I said. I’m *the gate keeper,* “ he said again in his low voice. “And … this reservation has your names and ages on it.”

Dad laughed. “Thanks Troy.”

“No problem. Now, if you just follow this road here down to the end you will come smack dab into the resort hotel. From there they will be able to give you any of the information you require. I hope you guys have a fantabulous time!”

As the van pulled away Troy yelled after them, “See ya soon Hunt family!”

“Well, he was certainly an enthusiastic guy,” Mom noted.

“Enthusiastic? That’s an understatement!” Jordan replied.

“I thought he was awesome!” Gwen put in.

Dillon looked back out the window as Troy went about doing whatever is was that he did as *the gate keeper*.

He was a pretty cool guy, Dillon thought to himself.

The van pulled up to the front of the massive hotel. The family looked up in amazement at its size. They also noted tons of people milling around, walking down the paths, and some sharing a coffee or a drink at one of the nearby tables. As they got out they noted that the weather was just as beautiful as the surroundings. It seemed cooler in the valley at the resort than it was in the desert. That was probably due to the greenery all around which afforded a lot of shade from the hot sun. There also seemed to be quite a bit of humidity in the air. Not enough to soak your clothes; just enough to keep everything green and cool. It was like a garden of Eden in the middle of nowhere!

As soon as the van was stopped and the Hunts started to get out, they were greeted by two bellman and a valet.

“Good afternoon,” one of the Bellman said. He was a tall gangly man with short cropped blonde hair and spoke with an Australian accent. “Welcome to the Desert Oasis Resort.”

“Thank you,” said Mom politely.

The other bellman started grabbing luggage from the back of the van and

loaded it up onto his cart. Dad handed his keys to the valet and in no time the entire family was inside the main lobby of the resort.

The lobby was massive with marble floors and a large circular fountain in the middle. The fountain had a large eagle stature in the middle of it. The eagle had its wings spread, was looking up and seemed as though it just broke through the surface of the water as it headed skyward, and it had water spraying out of its mouth. Dillon thought it looked as though the bird was stuck in an eternal state of puking! Around the main eagle were smaller ones circling it. They seemed to be suspended from the ceiling by tiny cables that could barely been seen.

Mom and Dad went to the front desk so they could check in while Jordan and Claire waited with the bellman by the cart. Dillon and Gwen walked around in awe of the place. Almost the entire lobby was made of granite and ornate rocks. There were nature drawings of the Oasis all over the walls and the smell of fresh spring water filled the air. The air inside was just as moist and refreshing as it was on the outside with one exception: it was cooler in the hotel, probably due to the central air conditioning.

As Dillon and Gwen walked toward the front desk where Mom and Dad were, a curious drawing caught Dillon's eye. There was a large carved scene on the wall behind the desk which showed rivers of water flowing through the Oasis with all types of animals: deer, rabbits, coyotes, and such. At the very top corner of the carving, beside one of the large leafy trees was a small symbol. As Dillon's eyes focused in on it he almost fell over. His face went pale and he must have had a shocked expression on his face as he felt Gwen tugging at his arm and asking if he was okay.

When he came out of his stunned silence, he shook it off and looked down at her. "I'm fine," he said with a weak smile. "I'm just … suddenly not feeling well."

Mom must have overheard him as she came over and touched his shoulder reassuringly. She felt his forehead and looked at his eyes. "You don't feel like you have a fever, and you look fine. It'll be okay. We'll be in our rooms shortly and then you can lay down for a bit."

Dillon smiled again. So weak was it that he thought for sure Mom would

press on and start asking questions. Thankfully she didn't. He nodded slightly and glanced back at the wall. There, by the leaf, was the symbol of a square surrounding a pentagram which had an eye in the center of it. The only thing missing from it was the writing that was surrounding it. The symbol was small and barely noticeable, but Dillon noticed it. It was the image from his dream!

"You guys coming?" Jordan hollered.

Dillon stared, still zoned out as he puzzled over the strange symbol he'd seen now in his dreams and now in real life.

Claire shook his shoulder. "You coming?" she repeated.

How could that be? Dillon screamed in his mind. Then immediately he was struck by the image again, seen at another place. He now knew that he must have seen this image at the information center when he was at the counter buying his books from Tom Tom. All he knew was that he shook it off as being mistaken. Maybe he wasn't?

"In a minute," Dillon replied. "What room am I in?"

"You're with Jordan in room 418," Dad responded. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah. I just want to ask the girl at the desk a question. I'll be up there right away."

"You can ask her your question later," Mom said sternly. "Right now, you need to lay down. I'll bring some ice to your room. Maybe you're carsick or dehydrated. Some ice water and rest will help with both."

"I'm really okay Mom," Dillon replied. "I'll only be a minute and then I'll go and lie down for a bit until I'm feeling better," he pleaded. "Promise."

Mom looked at Dad for help. He hesitated for a moment, then nodded. "He'll be fine hun. It's just for a moment. Don't be too long," he said to Dillon.

Dillon knew he could always count on Dad to give him some much needed flexibility.

"Okay," conceded Mom. "But you're not to be longer than you need to."

Jordan, overhearing the exchange from the elevator hollered over, "I can't promise you'll be able to get in the room!"

"Come on man. Toss your brother a key-card," Dad said as he walked over to the elevator.

Jordan sighed, Dad having destroyed the fun he was going to have bugging his brother. Gwen giggled. Jordan pulled out one of the key-cards and tossed it to Dillon which fell conveniently short of his reach. Jordan smirked as though he just had the last word in the conversation.

The sleight didn't phase Dillon as he picked up the card and headed to the front desk. He had other things on his mind.

The woman at the front desk was about average height with short brown hair. She appeared to be in her early to mid twenties and had a slim build and was quite pretty. As she worked away typing on her computer her head moved to and away from the screen as she copied whatever information she was working on. When Dillon approached the desk she was so engrossed in her work that she didn't notice him at first.

"Excuse me," Dillon said in a soft voice. No response. "Excuse me," he said again, this time a little louder.

The woman seemed startled, but quickly collected herself. "Oh … sorry about that," she said.

"No problem," Dillon replied.

"What can I do for you?"

Dillon was silent for a moment, not really knowing how he wanted to proceed. "I was just wondering," he said at length, "what is that symbol up on the wall behind you?"

The woman turned around and scanned the wall. "What symbol?" she asked.

"That one over there at the top corner of the leaf," he said as he pointed towards it.

The woman looked to where he was motioning. It took her a moment but she finally saw what he was curious about. She looked closer. "You know … I'm not sure," she replied. "I'm actually really new to Oasis Resort and I don't come from around here." She turned again toward Dillon. "I'm from Canada! The name's Janeen," she said with a smile as she stretched out her hand.

"Oh … uh … I'm Dillon," he replied as the two shook hands.

"How did you even notice that?" Janeen asked in surprise. "It's so small and blends in quite well with the surrounding carving."

“I guess I have a knack for seeing obscure stuff. I also don’t see an artist name anywhere on the wall,” he replied as he scanned the rest of the carving.

Janeen smiled again. “Hmmm, that’s weird. You know what, Dillon? I can ask around for you and let you know what I find out, if anything,” she offered.

Dillon smiled back and nodded. He headed for the elevator feeling a little confused and almost sick to his stomach. *How could I have clearly seen this symbol in a dream when I had never been here before,”* he thought to himself. *Maybe I saw it in a book I read, or from some info on-line when I was researching the place? No*, he realized. He would have remembered reading about it if he had. He knew he couldn’t dismiss this. There was something going on here, and he had to find out what.

9

DISTURBING THOUGHTS

Dillon found himself sliding through the dark, not knowing where he would end up. He could feel his back and legs getting scratched up as he tumbled down the rocky stairs. Fortunately he didn't seem to hit his head on the way down. Then, before he knew it, the stairs opened up suddenly into a large cavernous room that was dimly illuminated.

Dillon hit the floor and rolled a few feet from the mouth of the stairs. Before he fully got his senses back he felt himself being roughly yanked from the floor.

"Way to go Dil!" his brother yell at him. "You better tell me what's going on right now."

He looked around stunned. His brother had a few scratches on his face and arms. Fresh blood slowly showed itself from the many scrapes. "Sorry, but I was more concerned about what was chasing us!" he snapped back.

"Why did you follow me anyway?" Dillon asked in an accusing tone.

"Because you seemed so adamant about sneaking out in the middle of the night," Jordan replied. "And Mom would kill me if I knew you were doing something stupid and didn't do anything about it!"

"Well … thanks," said Dillon as he began to wipe himself off.

"Don't mention it, numbskull. Where do you think we are anyway?"

"I don't exactly know," Dillon responded as he started to look around, and take in more of their surroundings. As he scanned the walls of the large chamber something caught his eye. He walked towards one of the walls to the side as he

reached in his pocket for his cell phone. He turned the flashlight function on and shined it at the wall. The light came on, but immediately dimmed and flickered a little. Dillon looked at his phone for a moment, trying to figure out what was happening, but quickly decided to point it at the wall before his battery totally died. There, etched into the wall was a carving of some sort. As he looked closer in the dim light he almost fell over as the picture that was etched into the wall was the same square with a pentagram inside of that and an eye inside of that!

He was suddenly jolted from his thoughts as Jordan smacked him on the shoulder. Before he had time to turn around he felt another smack, then he felt that he was being shaken roughly. He tried to get away but couldn't. The room began to spin and fade.

"What are you …" he started to say but couldn't get the rest of the sentence out.

"Wake up numbskull," he heard someone say.

DILLON OPENED HIS EYES GROGGILY TO SEE JORDAN STANDING OVER HIM shaking his shoulder.

"Wake up!" Jordan said again before walking away into the restroom. "Mom and Dad want us ready for breakfast in fifteen minutes."

After collecting himself Dillon realized that he must have had another dream. This time it was Jordan that was with him and not Gwen. It was beginning to get weird with him seeing that symbol again. His mind must be working overtime, he thought to himself. It was probably due to the carving of it that he saw on the wall behind the guest services desk. Either way, there was now an intense desire in him to try and find out what that symbol meant.

Dillon shook off the disturbing thoughts and hurried to get ready. He quickly threw on his shorts and t-shirt. The two quickly exited the room and ran down the hall heading for the elevator. They saw the door open up and Jordan dashed inside. Dillon quickly sidestepped through the door leading to the stairs as he was determined to beat his brother.

He started down as fast as he dared, jumping two steps at a time. He and Jordan were always in a race when they had places to go, and Dillon was determined that he would beat the elevator down the four flights of stairs. Just as he rounded the last corner down he had to make an emergency push to the side as he noted, at the last minute, a man coming up the stairs. He wasn't able to get completely out of the way and crashed into the man's shoulder which sent him flying into the opposite wall. He hit with a thud and fell to the floor.

The man he hit held tightly to the rail so he didn't topple over.

"Are you okay?" asked the man as he rushed over to stand before Dillon.

Dillon looked up and saw a man about six feet tall with a cleanly shaven scalp, and bright blue eyes staring down at him and offering a hand. He had a large strange looking tattoo on the right side of his bald head that looked like some sort of Asian writing. Dillon hesitate for a moment, being taken off guard by the striking look of the man's tattoo, then grasped his hand and was hoisted easily to his feet.

"There. That's better," the man said with a smile. "I'm Derek."

Dillon smiled back. "I'm Dillon," he said. "Sorry for running into you. It's just I …"

Derek waved his hand. "No need to explain," he said. "I'm just glad you're not hurt."

Dillon smiled and nodded slightly as he started toward the door that led to the lobby. "See you around Derek!"

"Take care Dillon," Derek replied as he started up the stairs again.

Dillon opened the door and was about to exit the stairway when his eye caught a glimpse of something small that was on the ground in the stairwell. He quickly backtracked and stooped down to see what it was. It looked like a small souvenir coin. It had the name of the resort on the one side, and, what looked like, a picture of the hotel on the other.

"Hey Derek," Dillon called to the man who was heading up the stairs. "Is this yours?"

Derek glanced at him and came back down the stairs. As Dillon stood up he handed the coin to him.

“Yes it is,” Derek replied. “It must have fallen out of my pocket when we ran into each other.”

After handling it for a moment he gave it back to Dillon. “Why don’t you keep it. I bought extra anyway from the souvenir shop, and they’re really not that expensive.”

“Oh … okay,” Dillon replied as he took the coin back and put it in his pocket. “Thanks!” he said with a smile.

“No problem.”

Dillon turned and burst through the door, seeing Jordan standing in the hall before him with a smug look on his face.

“I know, I know, you won this time,” Dillon spouted. “But can you get to the table first?” he asked as he sped by Jordan in a full-tilt run. Jordan was taken initially off guard, but quickly responded to the challenge by taking off after his brother. The two weaved around pedestrian traffic and stationary objects as they sped to the restaurant, only slowing down when they came into view of Mom, Dad, Claire, and Gwen sitting at a table near the front of the entrance to the restaurant.

As they approached, Jordan gave Dillon a quick shot in the arm before they sat down.

“What took you guys so long?” Dad asked.

“Oh nothing,” Jordan responded. “Just trying to get sleeping beauty here out of bed. That’s all.”

Claire laughed.

“So what do you guys think of this place so far?” asked Mom from behind an upraised menu.

That comment started a barrage of discussion from the Hunt kids, particularly from Gwen, who was always hard pressed to keep quiet. As the others talked, Dillon absently traced the symbol he had seen in his dreams on the table with his finger. The words of the others washed over him, but he couldn’t concentrate.

“Dillon, are you okay?” his Mom asked.

Dillon looked up in surprise and blinked. “Uh, yeah. Sure.” He dropped his

gaze back to the table and frowned. He'd even drawn the symbol in his syrup. He scribbled it out with his fork, heart pounding.

When he looked up, he saw his mom still watching him. He winced and looked away.

"What's going on Dillon?" his mom asked, concern etched on her face.

Dillon shifted uneasily. "Nothing," he said. "I just … didn't have a very good night sleep."

Jordan snorted. "Please! I could barely wake you this morning."

Dillon shrugged, not willing to be goaded into another useless argument with his brother.

Mom did not look convinced but didn't press the matter further.

To him, playing a character in an adventure was one thing, but trying to fake being okay when, in fact, his mind was a mile away was another. He was disturbed by the events of the last couple days, especially by the dreams he was having and the mysterious symbol that kept showing up. He knew that he couldn't tell anyone about the dreams and the symbol because he would just sound crazy. He felt that no one would believe him; especially given the fact that he always made up all sorts of crazy stories that he played out in his adventures. The problem with this one is that it was real.

"So what's the plan today then?" Claire interjected, after she saw that Dillon's and Jordan's conversation was going nowhere.

"Oh I don't know," responded Dad. "What do you guys want to do today? I for one would like some relaxation by the pool."

Gwen perked up at that. She loved swimming. Jordan and Claire both nodded in ascent at the idea.

"Sure. Sounds good to me," Dillon put it, not wanting to be the "odd-man out."

"Okay, kids, so we're doing pool time and then maybe a tour of the area, right?" Mom asked, whipping out her phone. Her fingers typed on the keyboard. The kids all noticed how Mom took Dad's suggestion of pool-time and then added a tour. That's how Mom operated. She was always trying to cram as much activity as she could into their vacations. It was never enough for her to just

relax and take it easy. The kids were used to it by now and just kind of rolled with it.

Dad rolled his eyes and put an arm around her shoulder. “Honey, we’re on vacation. We don’t need to plan every minute.”

Mom scowled at Dad. “But we do need to know where everyone is going to be. What if something happens?”

“Uh-oh, Mom’s going full CSS on us!” Dillon said with a grin.

“CSS?” Gwen asked.

“Constant Surveillance System,” Dillon explained.

Mom rolled her eyes while Jordan and Claire snickered. “Better safe than sorry. Now, everyone’s phones out. Let’s get this calendar synched!”

Dillon wasn’t keen about spending time on a tour of the town. He wanted to explore more of the resort instead. He was sure that there would be more potential clues to the mystery of the symbol and he couldn’t wait to start hunting for them.

He looked over to Dad. “If you don’t mind, Dad, I’d just like to hang out here for a bit today,” he said. “Can I pass on the trip to town?”

“Are you sure?” he asked. “It’s gonna be pretty cool exploring the town.”

“Ya, I’m sure,” Dillon responded. “Besides we’re going to be here for a while anyway. I’ll have lots of time to explore.”

“What do you think babe?” Dad turned and asked Mom.

“Well, I’m concerned that you’ll be here all alone.” She paused for a moment before continuing. “But … I guess if you stay on the resort property, keep your phone close, and stay in populated areas it should be okay as long as you promise to stay out of trouble.”

Dillon smiled. “Come on. What could possibly happen?”

“If you’re really concerned about it, I’ll stay here and keep an eye on him,” Jordan piped in.

Mom smiled. “Thanks Jordan. That would ease my concern.”

“No problem. Always trying to help.”

“Ya right,” Claire said under her breath.

“What was that?” Jordan snapped at her angrily.

“Oh nothing,” she replied innocently. “Enjoy your time here with Dillon.” She gave him one of those sarcastic smiles.

Dillon just shook his head and let his brother and sister go at it. He knew when not to get in the middle of one of their tiffs.

Instead, he looked down, about to cut into his pancakes, when he saw it again. There, in front of him was the symbol he had drawn into his syrup again, which shocked him more than he thought it should have. He had a feeling that he was losing control of himself and it scared him. He had no idea what was happening to him, but he knew he needed to find out. He needed to find out fast.

10

THE MAN IN THE PICTURE

After breakfast was done, and the family enjoyed a couple hours by the pool the Hunts, with the exception of Dillon and Jordan, packed their day-trip gear and boarded the small shuttle bus that headed to town.

"Don't forget to keep an eye on your brother," Mom instructed Jordan before they left.

"Ya ya … I got this," Jordan replied as he settled back down in his deck chair.

After they left Dillon turned to his brother. "Mom just said you had to keep an eye on me."

Jordan rolled his eyes. "Sure, I'll keep an eye on you every time you come to the pool. And when you do you gotta make sure you stay away from me so you don't ruin my game!"

"Game?" Dillon asked with a snort. "I kept track of your 'game' on the way down here. Trust me, you're better off with me." He danced out of the way as Jordan aimed a punch for his shoulder.

"Just don't tell mom and you can do what you want," Jordan said.

Dillon shrugged. "Sure thing."

In truth, Dillon didn't want Jordan anywhere near him while he was researching the symbol. But any opportunity he had in order to get a "dig" in at his brother he would take.

DILLON WAS DETERMINED TO USE EVERY POSSIBLE RESOURCE HE COULD IN ORDER to find out about this symbol. He was actually really tempted to relax with Jordan by the pool as he did have a sleepless night, but the fear of seeing the symbol again in his dreams pushed him to pursue its meaning instead.

The most likely place he could think of to start looking was in his book about John Taylor Sebastian. If anyone knew what this meant it would definitely be him, he reasoned to himself. If that didn't have anything then he would look in every book, brochure, and on-line literature that he could find on the place.

After gathering up all the resources he could find about Desert Oasis Resort he parked himself in the business center which was by the lobby. It was nice and quiet in that room and there were computer terminals he could access to do his research. It was perfect! The best part about it was that there were free cookies, muffins, and fruit which were laid out in the room for those who needed a snack while they worked on whatever it was that they were doing.

Dillon walked over and grabbed a few nice big chocolate chip cookies from under the tray lid and marched back to where he had set up "camp." He began flipping through the book on John Taylor Sebastian. As he thumbed through the pages he scanned the text for anything that would remotely describe the symbol. While looking at the photographs that were in the book of John, his colleagues, and some of the surrounding territory, he held them up every which way to see if he could see some sign of the symbol. Nothing. He must have looked for about an hour through that book but couldn't find even a trace. He then resorted to his other pieces of literature and then finally the internet. Nothing. It was incredibly frustrating!

After taking a bit of a break to stretch his legs and grab another cookie Dillon decided to go back to reading the book on John Taylor Sebastian. He flipped through it slowly this time, reading more of the text in detail. It was actually kind of interesting. John apparently was a celebrated archeologist before he ever tried to discover the source of the Oasis. He had numerous findings to his name, including some long lost south American tribes that were, up to the

time he investigated, considered myths. The introduction to the book described him as a strong, polite, quiet man who spent countless hours pouring over books in search of some missing detail that he believed would unlock the whole mystery of what he was researching. There was, however, another side to him that described him as adventurous and an avid outdoorsman. Apparently he never married as his work kept him away from home far too much.

As Dillon read about this man he began to feel as though he knew him somehow; like they had a connection that was seen in common interests. Of course John had years of study and field experience to his name while Dillon had imaginary adventures and a weird gift for finding stuff. This, Dillon figured, drew a line of difference between the two—a big line.

As he read on, he found that John was skeptical about the length of time the Oasis was active. From what Dillon had researched on the net earlier it said that the Oasis was formed in the 1800's, but John had compelling evidence that it actually wasn't that long ago. He figured it was only about five to ten years old—around 2008 to 2013! Dillon sat back pondering the thought.

How could this have been kept such a secret for so long? Was it because it was on private property? Dillon thought to himself. *And how come there is very little contradictory evidence to these facts in any other research that was around? Unless someone was trying to cover it up.*

John, according to the book, figured just that: that someone, for whatever reason, was trying to keep the recent origin of the Oasis a secret. Dillon had heard Mom and Dad discuss the modern phenomenon of misinformation that happens in today's world while they watched the news at home. They always marvelled at the amount of contrary "facts" that people put out there, but Dillon never really understood that idea. To him, it was just the world he was growing up in, and he figured that it was just life. Now, however, he was put in a position where he had to sort out what was true and what was false. This now gave him a better idea of what Mom and Dad were talking about, and he felt a little frustrated at having to find out what was true and what was false.

Further pondering this Dillon turned the page as he was reading and saw the first picture that was in the book. It was a photo taken of John and a few others

when they arrived at the Oasis in 2016 to begin their research. There were four men and a woman in the photograph. The woman and three of the men were apparently John's field workers that were supporting him on this investigation, but the fourth man was a native man. Everything in the picture was crisp and clear except for this man's face. It seemed that the resolution was off on him, as if the camera or the lighting was somehow off, *or* someone was trying to deliberately mask who it was. The bottom of the photo indicated that his name was Tokala Tenderfoot.

He went to the computer and typed in all of the names on the picture into the search engine. All of them came up as being field archeologists that went missing the same time John did, except Tokala Tenderfoot. His name had no reference to the man Dillon was seeing in the picture. He was about to open another search window when the lights in the business center flickered then went out; his computer screen went black. He looked around wondering what had happened.

An older man noticed the confused look on Dillon's face and said, "Don't worry son, it's just a temporary blackout. The power will be back on any moment."

Sure enough, right after he spoke the light came to life again.

"See?" the man commented.

Dillon nodded. "Thanks," he replied, then he went back to the book and tried to get a better look. He figured the computer would be useless so he just left it off. Then he had an idea! He pulled out his phone and took a picture of the picture with the camera app. He then used his fingers to zoom in and turn the photo in different ways, trying to see it in different angles. He squinted his eyes as he looked harder at the picture. Even though it pixelated when he zoomed in he was able to make out more detail. "That looks like—" His mouth dropped open as he suddenly recognized the man. It was Tom Tom!

The revelation knocked him back. Tom Tom must have been John's guide while he was here. If anyone knew what had happened to John he would! Dillon sat back for a moment trying to digest the information. "There's something going on here," he said to himself.

“Eh!” came a call from the older man at one of the computer terminals beside him. “Did you say something boy?”

Dillon blushed a little. “Ah … No. Just talking to myself,” he admitted.

It was Tom Tom who led me to this book, he thought to himself. *I wonder if that wasn’t an accident?*

Dillon quickly packed up his stuff and headed for the bell desk. He knew now what he had to do.

There, at the desk, was the tall gangly Australian who helped the Hunts with their luggage when they first arrived. He looked as though he was trying to appear busy, but Dillon could totally see through him. He was bored out of his mind!

“Hey … um … ” Dillon started to say, trying to remember if he ever did get the guy’s name when they checked in.

The Australian looked at him then smiled. “My name’s Keith mate,” he said in his thick Australian accent. “But everyone just calls me Aussie.”

“Oh … okay Aussie. I was wondering if you guys rented Bikes around here?”

“Sure thing … ” he paused, looking inquisitive. “What was your name again?”

“Oh … Dillon. Dillon Hunt.”

“Right! The Hunt family. Now I remember! If you head about half way down the resort, through those doors and to the right you run right into the rental shops.”

“Thanks man!” Dillon replied as he started off, hoisting his backpack higher onto his shoulder. “I mean, *mate*,” he corrected.

Aussie smiled and waved goodbye as Dillon exited the main lobby.

As far as rental shops went this place was pretty awesome in Dillon’s estimation. There were tons of equipment and outdoor games that could be rented; from boats, to bikes, and even small off-road buggies. Dillon paused at

the buggies for a moment then shook the thought away.

Dad would kill me when he saw the cost of this added to the bill! he thought to himself. No, he realized that he could easily explain the twenty or so dollars to rent a bike for the afternoon as opposed to the mini dune buggy. Still … he continued to imagine what it would be like to whip across the desert hills in one of these bad boys as he stroked the protective cage that gave the buggy its form and awesome look. Finally he was jolted back to reality by a voice coming from behind him.

"Can I help you with something?" a woman asked.

Dillon turned around to see an older native lady standing there smiling at him. He noticed that her name tag said "Tara."

"Can I help you find something?" she asked again with that disarming smile.

"Ah … yeah …" Dillon stumbled as he was pulled back into reality. "I would like to rent a bike," he replied.

"Okay. What kind of bike?"

Dillon looked around the shop. "Something that's good for the desert dunes just in case I want to do some off-roading," he said. "Something like that." He pointed at a stylish looking BMX that was hanging from the ceiling on a hook amidst a number of other styles of bikes hanging in the same row. It was a Redline Proline Pro BMX race bike. It was similar to the one he had at home except way more expensive. It was top-of-the-line, made with the best components, and was super light! Despite some of the other kids at the track having these bad boys he was never able to try one.

"Okay," Tara replied as she headed around the desk. "I'll get my helper to pull it down for you." She turned and yelled, "Trent! I need you to get a bike down for me."

After a moment a young native boy about Dillon's age came out of the back room.

"How would you like to pay for that?" Tara asked.

Dillon held up his room key. "Can I just put it on my room?"

"Sure thing," she said, holding out her hand. She swiped the card and then typed in some numbers before handing the card back to Dillon.

“Will there be anything else for you?”

“Just a helmet if you could. A fully enclosed BMX one if you have it,” Dillon responded.

“No problem,” the woman smiled.

After a few moments the young native boy handed Dillon the bike. “Thanks man,” Dillon said.

“No problem,” the young boy replied. “Just be careful of what’s out in the desert. And make sure you’re back before dark.”

Dillon looked at him curiously.

“What I mean is that there’s snakes by day, coyotes at night, and other things that you need to avoid.”

“Oh … Okay,” Dillon replied. *Maybe I should have read a little bit of that book about the creatures of the desert I got from the information center,* he thought to himself.

“Where are you headed anyway?” the boy asked.

“Just to the information center.”

“Oh. It should be a good ride then. The path is a little hilly, but it shouldn’t take that long and it’s well traveled by others who want to experience the desert scenery. Besides, there are a ton of good jumps and smaller side trails that should make the ride way more fun!” The boy smiled wide at that last remark.

“Thanks. What path?” Dillon asked.

“This one,” the boy responded as he reached onto the counter and grabbed a small brochure. He unfolded it and handed it to Dillon. It was a map of the Oasis and surrounding area. On it were a number of trails through the desert. One of the trails led right to the info center that was a few miles out of town.

“If you take the trail your time will be way better than going on the highway. It will take about ten minutes and it’s a lot more fun,” Trent said.

“You enjoy yourself,” Tara said as she handed Dillon the helmet she pulled from the counter. “Just make sure the bike’s back by the end of the day or we’ll have to charge you for another full day,” she warned.

“No problem. End of the day. Got it. Avoid dangerous creatures. Got it. Have fun and take lots of jumps. Got it!” he responded as he exited.

II

TOM TOM AND JOHN TAYLOR SEBASTIAN

Dillon was amazed at the clear dividing line between where the Oasis ended and the desert started. He noticed it on the way in, but it had a different impact on him now that he was biking through it. It was almost as though there was some sort of invisible wall between the lush green ground and the rocky, sandy, sterile land. As Dillon rode across “the line” he looked up and down the distance of the lush green land. The Oasis was huge! It went in each direction for quite a few miles he estimated and then turned back toward the way he came. And it wasn’t just a straight line, it zigged and zagged, but everywhere it turned there was definitely a clear line of separation between the Oasis and the desert.

As he continued down the rocky trail on his BMX he remembered reading that the really weird thing about the Oasis is that it never grew or diminished in the few years it had been around. This information came directly from personal testimony of the people who lived here. Of course no one who was an outsider really knew for sure as the tribal owners had been pretty protective of letting others on their land in order to conduct tests. As a matter of fact the books Dillon was reading seemed to indicate that John Taylor Sebastian was the only one with almost unlimited access to the resort in order to carry out his investigations. It wasn’t really clear why John Taylor Sebastian was the only one with this kind of access. What was clear was that he, and members of his team, were the only ones to have gone missing. Dillon’s gut told him that there was a connection to

this; he just didn’t know what that was yet.

The trail to the information center was just as awesome as the boy at the rental place said it would be. The suspension on the BMX was put to the test as Dillon pounded over the hard rocky surface and dipped down into the low gullies. He got air more than enough. And the speed he could get at certain points was amazing! He was truly in his element.

As he flew over the next jump he started to picture himself riding a futuristic motorcycle that used antigravity technology to keep it just above the ground. The desert track suddenly turned into a concrete highway in his mind’s eye. He found himself cruising by other cars and bikes at 250 miles per hour. The rush was incredible!

He looked to his belt and noted the MX1500 machine pistol strapped there. For now, he was Agent Dexter Malone of the Twilight City Central Police Department (TCCP). He looked forward again and saw the woman he was hunting down: Deborah Gale, also known as The Night Hawk.

The TCCP had been trying to catch The Night Hawk for months as she was wanted for multiple charges of robbery and murder, most notably the robbery of Princeton Techs newest invention, a super soldier serum known as Weapon 10. Word was that she was going to sell it to the highest bidder on the dark web. With that serum in the wrong hands, the world would be plunged into chaos.

Malone couldn’t let that happen.

He jammed the bike into a higher gear and hit the accelerator to max. His bike roared and took off. The Night Hawk looked back and saw Malone catching up. She reached down, drew her gun from its holster, and started firing at the daring Agent.

Malone swerved and veered, all the while keeping his eye on the target. He ducked in and out of traffic with deadly precision.

“Put the weapon down, and surrender,” Malone said, his helmet amplifying his voice so that she could hear him. “You have one chance,” he warned.

The only response he received was her jamming down on the accelerator and pulling away from him.

He smiled. “Good. This should be fun,” he said to himself.

With lighting speed he pulled his MX1500 and fired a single shot. The bullet grazed The Night Hawk's hand and drove into the accelerator. Her bike started to slow instantly as she retracted her hand, obviously in pain. As Malone quickly neared her he leaped from the seat, keeping both his hands on the handle bars, and spun both his legs around, kicking her in the side which sent her flying from her bike.

He smiled again, knowing that there was no way The Night Hawk was getting away from him.

Before Dillon could finish his imaginary adventure he came into view of the back side of the info center. He cleared his head, and came back to reality, parking his bike off to the side and went right to the front door. He stopped for a moment and looked around. It was eerily quiet as there didn't seem to be anyone around. He noted two vehicles in the parking lot but other than that there was not a trace of anyone, or anything else, except for the odd tumble weed here and there blowing across the highway. He shrugged it off and pushed on the door. It didn't open. He tried again but realized that it was locked. He looked at the hours of operation sign and noted that the place should be open right now.

Dillon got a shiver down his back. He knew something was wrong. He looked around for a moment and pressed his face up against the glass, trying to get a look of what was going on inside if he could. Everything seemed quiet.

Maybe I'm overreacting? he thought to himself. *Right … In the middle of the day with two vehicles parked out front when the store hours clearly indicate that it's supposed to be open and it's not even lunch yet. It's all just a little too suspicious.*

He moved to the side and around the building searching for another way in. He found a side door but that too was locked. As he moved around he noticed a window about six feet off the ground that was wound open about ten inches. It was clearly too small an opening for most people, but fortunately Dillon was still only twelve and hadn't filled out yet. He figured he could fit through if he could get a boost. He searched around a little more and found a garbage can that would be perfect for him use.

Before he proceeded any further he decided that he should probably look up

the phone number and see if anyone would pick up first. He wasn't keen on breaking and entering and figured he should try this first. The phone rang and rang until the voicemail engaged.

"Hi. Thanks for calling the Desert Oasis Information Center," a woman's voice said. "Our hours of operation are from 8 AM to 8 PM, Monday to Friday, and 8 AM to 5 PM on Saturday and Sunday. If you would like to leave a message please do so after the tone. Thank you."

Dillon hung up. It should be open right now. That knowledge gave Dillon a sinking feeling. He didn't want to believe it, but he started to think that something was wrong. He needed to get inside.

After positioning the trash can, he hoisted himself up. Before entering he took off his backpack and squeezed it through the window. He kept a firm hold on the bag as he squirmed through, not wanting it to make any noise inside the building if he let it drop to the floor. About halfway through he paused for a moment and listened while he looked around inside the room, just to make sure no one was there. Even for him the fit through the window was tight! But he somehow managed to get through anyway. Once inside he quickly looked around and tried to get his bearings. He apparently snuck into the small coffee room that the employees used for their break times. There were a couple tables, some chairs, a counter with a coffee pot on it, a fridge in the corner, and a small flat screen TV hanging on the wall.

Dillon noticed the half-opened door directly across from where he had entered the room. He crept silently to the door and slowly peeked his head out, looking both ways down the adjoining hallway to see if anyone was there. It was empty. As he moved from the room he heard some muffled speaking coming from down the hall. Slowly he walked toward the muffled conversation, careful to watch every footfall so as not to alert anyone to his presence.

As he neared the end of the hallway he could hear the conversation becoming more clear. He definitely recognized one of the voices. It was Tom Tom.

"I told you before. I don't know what happened to him!" Tom Tom stated emphatically.

“I don’t think you realize what danger exists here,” the other man replied.

Dillon couldn’t help but think that the other man’s voice seemed familiar somehow but he just couldn’t place it.

“I know very well what these people are capable of and … ”

“That’s why you refuse to give me the information I need,” the other man finished.

“No … no … it’s not that. Listen, if I could help you I would,” Tom Tom replied. “John was my friend. I never wanted anything bad to happen to him.”

“So you say.”

“Yes! Of course! How dare you accuse me of helping to harm my friend!” Tom Tom cried in rage.

“So he’s been harmed?” the man questioned slyly.

“No! I didn’t mean … I don’t know … You’re confusing me,” Tom Tom said. “Please, just leave.”

“Not until you start being straight with me!” the man said, raising his voice for effect.

Dillon thought for sure that a fight was about to break out. Out of instinct he looked around for an escape route just to make sure he could run to safety before calling for help.

“I am being straight with you,” he heard Tom Tom reply in a barely audible voice. Quiet sniffles followed Tom Tom’s statement. A moment later, Dillon heard someone blowing their nose. He could almost feel the tears welling up in the old man’s eyes. A long awkward silence ensued.

“Okay,” replied the other man finally. “But if you hear, see, or suddenly *remember* anything at all, please give me a call.”

Dillon heard footsteps coming toward the hallway where he was. He quickly shuffled back the way he had come and tucked into the coffee room again, hiding around the partially opened door. He could hear the footsteps get louder until they were right at the door. Then they stopped. Dillon could hear his heart pound. It felt as though his chest was going to explode. He didn’t dare breathe. Then the steps moved on. Dillon let out a sigh of relief. He knew he should have tried to get a look at who it was that was arguing with Tom Tom, but he couldn’t

move.

After a moment he was able to finally collect himself and came back out of the room. “Okay,” he said to himself. “You can do this. You can do this.”

He heard the front door to the info center open and close; the distinctive chimes on the door ringing out from the movement. Now that the other man was gone Dillon didn’t feel the need to employ as much stealth as he had before, so he hurried down the hall and into the room where Tom Tom was.

Even though he had only met Tom Tom once, he had a strange feeling that he could trust the guy. Maybe it was his boyhood naiveté? He wasn’t sure, but he felt driven to know what happened to John and he needed Tom Tom’s help. Despite the fact that he just overheard a conversation where Tom Tom denied knowing where John was, he still felt there was information the old man could share that might shed some light on this mystery.

The back room was large and full of various merchandise—boxed and otherwise. Dillon noticed that there was a large table near the back with three chairs scattered around it in no organized fashion. As he entered the room he immediately saw Tom Tom leaning over the table with his hands firmly planted against it. He appeared to be mumbling to himself. Tom Tom shot his head up, alerted to Dillon’s presence when he entered the room. The old man’s eyes were red and teary. He looked confused when he saw Dillon standing there looking at him.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“Oh … I …” Dillon stumbled for a reply. It was as though all of his confidence left him at once and he couldn’t think of a good answer to give the clearly shaken man. “I …” he tried again.

“Well?” Tom Tom pressed more forcefully.

“I just wanted to ask you some questions,” Dillon blurted, realizing at that moment that he should have prepared himself more for this meeting. It also just dawned on him that he was just about to ask Tom Tom about John Taylor Sebastian, which was no doubt the same John the man who the previous guy just asked him about which was the very conversation that made Tom Tom visibly shaken and upset. *How Stupid!* he thought to himself.

“About what?” Tom Tom asked sceptically. “How much did you hear?”

Dillon froze and the blood drained from his face. A huge lump welled up in his throat. He didn’t know what to say.

“What does it matter anyway?” a resigned Tom Tom finally said at length as he sat down in the chair closest to him. “What are you curious about Mr. Hunt?”

Dillon relaxed at that and moved closer, grabbing a seat across from the old man. “I was reading up on … ” he began but then paused, not sure how Tom Tom would take the next statement, “ … on John Taylor Sebastian and … ”

“And you want to know how much I knew him?” the old man cut in.

“Well I saw a picture of him and his team in the book I purchased from your store and noticed that you were in it,” Dillon stated.

Tom Tom’s shoulders shrunk a little. “Yes I knew him,” he said. “He was my friend. Not that they would believe me,” he finished, waving a hand at the door to indicate the man who had just left.

Dillon looked from the door back to Tom Tom. “Who are *they*? he asked.

“Aren’t you a little young to be asking such questions?” Tom Tom put in. “Shouldn’t you be enjoying yourself with your family and the other kids at the resort?”

“I would, but I can’t get the thought of John Taylor Sebastian and the mystery he was investigating out of my mind. It’s as though I am driven for some reason to help uncover what has happened here.” Dillon paused for a moment. “I can’t explain it,” he finally said in a soft voice.

“Dillon, you’re just a boy!” Tom Tom exclaimed, almost pleading with him. “You shouldn’t be asking these questions or worried about these events. They happened and no one can change that. Others three times your age have come here and failed to find what they were looking for. What makes you think you can crack this when they haven’t been able to?”

Dillon was hit hard by Tom Tom’s words. Up to this point he never thought that he couldn’t do what others failed to do. He seemed to possess a confidence that was innate—apart from age, circumstance, or training. It had never occurred to him until now that he was way over his head. *Maybe Tom Tom is right,* he thought to himself. *Maybe I should just go and be a kid; have fun at the resort*

and forget all this nonsense?

"I don't know," he said in a barely audible tone.

He was about to turn and walk away when Tom Tom said, "I can't tell you much Dillon. I warned John that the investigation was dangerous but he wouldn't listen to me."

Dillon thought for a moment. "Dangerous how?" he pressed.

"I can't explain it, and you need to drop it as well," Tom Tom said firmly. "No one else is going to get hurt because of this," he vowed. "This is dangerous in the way that experienced explorers have gone missing … never to be heard of again. Do you want your family going home without you, never knowing what happened to you?"

Dillon swallowed hard as a chill went down his back. He hadn't reasoned it out that way yet. What if the old man was right? He couldn't deny the logic of it.

Tom Tom must have noticed the look in Dillon's face as the revelation struck him. "Go and enjoy your vacation Dillon," he said softly.

Dillon nodded slightly. He was about to leave but knew he had to ask one more question. "What do you know about a symbol that is shaped like a boxed-in pentagram with an eye in the middle of it?"

Tom Tom looked hard at Dillon for a moment then said, "I don't know anything about that. I've never seen anything like that before."

Dillon nodded, then headed for the door. He wasn't sure if Tom Tom was telling the truth, but he knew he wasn't going to get anything else out of the man.

He suddenly stopped before leaving and looked back at the emotionally battered man. "Answer me honestly," he said. "Do you know how this Oasis came into being?"

Tom Tom looked at him in the eyes. "No," he replied. "Me and the rest of the tribe were enlisted just before the resort was built. We were convinced that the Oasis was naturally occurring and were promised jobs and financial stability. The tribal leaders showed us a model of what they wanted to do for this area and it excited us.

"Our tribe was suffering and we wanted a sense of well-being and

accomplishment so we went along without asking any questions. We trusted the elders and their business partners who made the proposal to us. It wasn't until John came here and started asking questions that I too got curious, but of course no one would tell us anything than what they already had."

"Who were the business partners?"

"I don't know," replied Tom Tom. "Everything seemed legit, so we didn't press for details."

"Did John tell you why he was investigating the origin of the Oasis?"

"No. He never fully revealed his intent, but I got the sense that there were some shady circumstances surrounding it. Before I had a chance to pry any more out of him he disappeared. It was then that I realized there was more going on here than the leaders let us know. I tried to talk to them, but they more or less implied that people who ask too many question tend to go missing." Tom Tom wiped a tear from his eye.

Dillon nodded then turned and walked through the door.

He headed down the hallway and into the main lobby of the information center. As he walked by the front counter something caught his eye. He glanced over and saw the reflection of a familiar looking symbol bouncing off some aviator-style sunglasses that were hanging on a rack on the counter. He walked over and around the rack and there, etched into the wood of the inside of the counter opposite the glasses was the all-too-familiar square shape with a pentagram inside of it with a single eye in the middle of that. Dillon was rocked back on his heels and the hairs on the back of his neck stood up.

"Tom Tom *was* lying about this," he whispered to himself. "He had to know this was here!"

He turned around quickly and started toward the hallway again but froze. There, in front of the hallway was a large coyote with yellow glowing eyes, staring at him. It bared its fangs as thick saliva dripped from its mouth.

12

COYOTES

The coyote lunged. Dillon barely managed to get out of the way. It slammed into a rack of clothing and got hung up for a moment. Dillon pulled himself off the floor and frantically looked for something to defend himself with. The coyote extracted itself and lunged again. Dillon managed to throw another rack of clothing in its way. The impact pushed Dillon aside and, as he fell, he felt a long hard object beside him as he scrambled along the floor. He realized at that moment that it was a broom. As he got his bearing again he grabbed onto the broom and shot it out in front of him just in time. The coyote bit down on the wooden shaft. It was only inches from his face. He could smell its foul rotten breath.

A small drop of saliva dripped from its mouth onto Dillon's hand. Oh it burned! Dillon could feel the pain. He screamed out. With all his strength he pushed the broom to the side and squirmed out from underneath the creature. As it went to reposition its grip on the shaft Dillon yanked it from its mouth and swung it quickly around, slamming the creature in the face. The shock of the blow from the hit jarred the broom from his hand and it fell to the side. The coyote also flew to the side from the impact. As it struggled to get up again Dillon turned and ran for the hallway as quickly as he could. He knew he didn't have time to pick up the broom as the creature appeared to be starting to recover already. He also knew he had to warn Tom Tom and couldn't spare a second.

He raced down the hall as fast as his legs would carry him. He could hear

that the creature had collected its senses again and was in pursuit. As Dillon neared the end of the hallway he spun into the room, bouncing a little off the door frame as he couldn't enter the room cleanly because of the momentum he had gained from the run. He sprawled into a couple of boxes and then onto his back. He saw the coyote slam into the wall at the end of the hallway as it leaped for him just as he turned into the room. Its ugly face went through the drywall and it landed hard on the ground. Dillon didn't wait to see if it was dead. He scrambled back away from the door, turned as he went, and jumped to his feet.

His heart sank as he saw the smashed boxes and overturned table of the room. It was clear that something happened to Tom Tom, but there was no sight of the old man. Dillon didn't have time to think more about it as he heard the creature behind him again and just knew that it was coming for him without mercy. He went further into the room in search of the back door he knew was there. He had seen the door when he first pulled up to the center on his bike earlier and was determined to escape through it. He glanced back and saw the creature coming into the room just as he dove behind the overturned table. He landed hard on his back which winded him a little, but he shook that off, knowing that he had bigger problems to worry about at the moment.

Dillon heard boxes being thrown around and a low growl as the creature was trying to pin point his location. He rolled over, got to his knees, and peeked his head out a little. He saw the back end of the coyote slip behind some boxes at the far end of the room. He knew he had to make a run for it, but his one leg shook so bad from the sheer fright of the situation that he didn't think he could make it. He grabbed it with his hand and tried to calm himself down by breathing deeply a couple of times. The rattling of the boxes was getting more feint which Dillon took as a sign that the coyote was further away now. Slowly he stood and tip-toed toward where he figured the back door was. He made it around some more boxes and racks and saw the door about ten feet away. As he got closer he suddenly heard a rustling sound as boxes and other items were being pushed out of the way. He looked to the left and could see items being thrown aside and could tell that the coyote was quickly closing in on him. He knew he had to make a run for it.

Dillon lunged for the door. He turned the handle but found that it was locked! He could hear the beast getting closer. He fumbled around with the handle and managed to somehow get it unlocked. It still wouldn't open though. In his panic he didn't notice that it was also dead-bolted! He finally saw it and turned the bolt and began swinging the door open as quickly as he could. Just as he was about to jump out the creature slammed into the door full-force. It slammed shut. The coyote lunged at Dillon. By pure instinct he shot out his leg and kicked the thing as hard as he could in the head. The creature spun backwards and landed hard on the floor. Dillon knew that this was his only chance. He pulled the door open again and ran outside. When he got out he turned and grabbed the handle. He pulled on the door as hard as he could. Suddenly the coyote's head emerged from the bottom portion of the door. Dillon slammed its ugly head in the jamb. It didn't even yelp, but continued to snap and growl, spraying acidic saliva all over the place. Thankfully none of it landed on Dillon.

Dillon screamed. He had to resist the urge to let go of the door with all his might. He knew if he did this fight would be over. He looked around frantically for something he could use to push the creature back inside. There was nothing. Then he had an idea. He let one hand go of the door handle and quickly reached over and unclipped his backpack. He then slipped it off his other arm, grabbed the strap tightly and began levelling it on the head of the creature. Blow after blow after blow came raining down on the monster. Dillon didn't know if the beast could feel any pain but eventually it retracted its head enough so that he was able to open the door slightly and slam it down on the creatures snout as hard as he could. It finally made a yelping sound and pulled back into the room. Dillon slammed the door tightly.

He fell back, exhausted from the encounter. He tried to catch his breath. Then he heard it: distant howls coming somewhere in the desert. His heart skipped and his face went pale again. After taking a moment to digest what was potentially about to happen he leaped to his feet, clipped his backpack on, and ran to his bike. He slipped his helmet on and was off as quick as he could, back the way he had come. The howls were getting closer. He turned his head to look

back as he entered the trail and could see something coming toward him in the distance. Then another object caught his attention out of the corner of his eye. He couldn't make out what was coming toward him as the desert trail was constantly moving up and down along the landscape, but he had a pretty good—terrifying—idea. He silently berated himself for not taking the highway instead. At least he would have been able to see these things coming, and maybe even get help from a passing car. No. Unfortunately he was now committed to the trail. He couldn't turn back now.

He pumped his legs down on the pedals as fast as he could. He got so much speed that he started getting some decent air off the peaks of each rise. Dust flew out behind him. The path wound, dipped, and turned. He went into a slight dip and then came up fast to the top of a peak. His bike caught at least five feet of air. In mid jump, movement caught his eye to the right. He looked over to see another one of those beasts leaping for him from a hill. By instinct Dillon shot his foot out and clipped the creature in the side. It went down and Dillon sped on. He knew somehow that he wasn't going to be able to outrun these things so he decided that it was going to come down to outmaneuvering them. It was at this point that he got really appreciative of his parents for insisting that he be signed up for BMX racing. He knew that of all the bike races he had been in this was now his most important. He was racing for his life!

The creature he hit out of the air didn't stay down long as it bounced off the ground, rolled up on its feet, and continued the chase. Dillon drifted around a dusty corner and another coyote leaped at him from an adjacent hill. He barely managed to duck out of the way. He could hear a slight sizzling sound and knew that the creature had dripped some of its acidic saliva onto his helmet.

He went over the next rise and, by sheer luck, he clipped a third coyote in the face with his front tire. As it hit the tire it spun around a couple of times before it crashed into the ground. That last blow almost threw Dillon from his bike. It took all his skill to land after that hit. Thankfully there didn't appear to be any damage that he could note as he hit the ground and sped on.

Dillon swooped into a low valley that twisted and turned. He sucked in his breath as he went around every corner, expecting to see another creature lunging

at him. The sound of the howls of the beasts made Dillon's heart pump faster. It was a gross sound. Not like the smooth long howl you would hear from a wolf, but more of a yelping and yipping howl, almost akin to that of a hyena or even screaming children. It was terrifying! The worst part was that, because of the extremely uneven lay of the land, the yelps sometimes seemed far away while at other times they sounded as though they were right on top of him.

Dillon tried to shrug the unpleasant sounds away and just focus on speeding through these badlands as fast as he could. He hit a fairly long straight stretch in the low area he was ripping through and glanced back. He could see two of the coyotes come over opposite rises and into the valley in full pursuit. They didn't seem to be tiring and they were coming on fast. The most disturbing thing was that Dillon had no idea where the third one was. He turned his attention back in front of himself again and pumped his legs down on the pedals as fast as he could, but he knew he couldn't keep it up for much longer. The straight stretch finally veered to the right and climbed back up. He used all his dexterity to barely miss a massive boulder that just seemed to appear in the middle of the trail as he went around the corner. He knew that if he made one mistake and wiped out that the chase would be over. He heard what sounded like gunshots in the distance but didn't dare stop and take a look. He did manage to glance back and noticed that the two coyotes who were in pursuit stopped for a moment and seemed to be looking at something in the distance. He counted himself lucky as the distraction was enough for him to get a bit ahead before they turned and started the chase once more.

As he got to the top of the rise he could finally see the lush green oasis lingering before him. It was still a ways off, but just the sight of it gave the young boy hope that he might make it. The question in Dillon's mind, however, was if he had enough speed and endurance to make it to the threshold before the coyotes got him? And, if he did make it, could he survive long enough to make it to someone for help?

Dillon also felt indignant to the boy who had helped him in the shop with the bike as he said this trail was well traveled, and yet he hadn't seen a single soul! He shook all those unpleasant thoughts from his mind and sped as fast as his legs

would drive down on the pedals.

The coyotes behind him were relentless! And they were gaining on him again.

Focus Dillon, he said to himself. *You can do this*. He was almost there! A few more rises, a short straight stretch, and he would be there. He was already formulating a plan to be able to lose the creatures in the forest. He knew that once he got out of the open areas he should be able to out manoeuvre them amongst the trees.

By this time the two that were right behind him were nipping at his heels. Dillon came down from the last rise and onto the short straight stretch. He just crossed the line into the oasis when he saw something emerge from the corner of his eye. He turned his head slightly to the right and saw it. The third coyote! It was in mid leap and he didn't have time to react. It slammed into him hard, launching him from his bike. The bike rolled and tumbled onto the grass. Dillon hit the ground hard and rolled a number of times before coming to a stop. He shook the dizziness away and quickly turned around to see the coyote a couple of feet from him, baring its fangs and stalking forward.

He looked for something he could use as a weapon, but there was nothing. It was almost to him when it suddenly stopped. It stopped growling and looked confused. It backed away, appearing to be in pain. It started issuing whimpers as smoke began coming from its paws. It turned to flee but couldn't as its legs burst into flames, then the rest of the creature went up in a fiery inferno like an incredibly dry tree that had a match thrown on it. The screams it made were horrific! Dillon scrambled away from the dying beast and cupped his ears to block out the sound. In a matter of seconds it was over and all that was left of the beast was a pile of smouldering ash.

Dillon looked from the pile of ash to the other two coyotes that were at the edge of the Oasis. They paced back and forth, frothing acidic saliva, but not daring to enter the lush grounds. After a moment they both turned and ran off into the desert.

Dillon was dumbfounded, not knowing what to think about the events he had just been a part of. He stood up and walked over to the pile of ash and kicked it

around with his foot. As he did he noticed a glint come from within the pile. Not wanting to touch the ash with his hands he searched around for a small branch then used it to unearth what he saw. It appeared to be a small metal chip of some sort. He knew that it was no coincidence that this creature had, what appeared to be, an implant imbedded in it. He scooped it up and placed it into the side pocket of his backpack. He then collected his bike and started for the resort. He knew he needed to tell someone about what had just happened but he didn't know who.

Who was going to believe this crazy story! he thought to himself. *And what of Tom Tom?* He knew he had to go back. He knew he had to go back right away.

13

STARTLING DISCOVERY

Dillon raced to the bike shop in order to return the rental. The whole way over, he kept reminding himself to be cool, but the excitement of the situation wouldn't allow for that. He had to dance around why the bike was a little more scratched than it was when he picked it up, but Tara, the same woman who rented it to him didn't seem overly concerned about it. What she did seem concerned about was how much of a hurry Dillon seemed to be in. He knew he would definitely have to do better when he asked Dad to take him to the information center.

Dillon brushed off his anxiousness as him having to go to the restroom real bad. The story seemed to work as she didn't press him on it anymore.

"Thanks for the ride," he said as he hoisted his backpack over his shoulder and headed for the door.

"No problem," the lady replied. "Next time, try and be more careful. A bike can be replaced, but we wouldn't want you getting hurt. That could ruin your vacation."

Dillon paused at the door and glanced back at the woman, the seriousness of his situation crashing down on him. "You're right about that," he agreed soberly.

He was about to leave when he noticed the lights flickered in the store and then went out. "Another black out?" Dillon asked.

Tara just smiled and nodded. "We're in the process of upgrading our electrical system. When that's done, these should be a thing of the past."

The lights flickered and came to life again as Dillon nodded to the woman and exited the shop.

After he was gone, Tara stared at his helmet as she ran her hands over the small acid burns that were there. She put the scarred equipment down on the counter and reached for the phone.

"Hello," Bruce said as he answered his phone. "Hey Dillon! How are you?" he asked as he continued walking toward the pool with his towel slung over his shoulder. Gwen was close beside him. "Ya … we're just heading to the pool. It's too bad you didn't come to town with us. We saw tons of cool stuff! Even Claire had a good time if you can believe that?"

Gwen looked up at Dad and giggled at the comment.

"What have you been up to? I assumed you and Jordan were hanging by the pool." He listened as Dillon responded. "Oh … you went for a bike ride. Nice! I hope you saw lots of cool scenery! And no, I won't tell your Mom that you split from Jordan. You know what she's like … a little overprotective." He looked down at Gwen and smiled. "Okay man. If you want to join us we'll be pool side by the outdoor patio. Mom is grabbing us some shade under one of the umbrellas there." He paused again as Dillon responded. "See you in a bit then," he finished, sliding his phone back into his pocket.

"It sounds like your brother had a good time on a bike ride," he said to Gwen. "Maybe we should all consider doing that? A big family bike ride."

Gwen smiled and nodded.

Dillon raced to his room as quickly as he could. He wanted to drop off

his backpack and do a quick check of his appearance before going to see Dad. He didn't want to raise any suspicions that his activities while away from the family were anything but normal. It also gave him a chance to wind down after the encounter. He knew he had to play this smart and cool. He had to get back to the information center and he knew that if he told Dad the truth about what happened he would never believe him. If, on the other hand, he could show him the signs of struggle in the center, and the absence of Tom Tom, then that would elevate his chances of getting help to another level.

After changing his shirt and wiping the dust from his face and arms he headed for the pool. He knew he had to play this cool and smart. He could have asked Dad over the phone to take him to the center, but he knew that Dad always responded better to such requests in person. That brought a challenge, as he wasn't sure he was going to be able to act normally enough to convince him that nothing was wrong. It was a gamble, but he had to try.

As he entered the pool area he did a quick scan and saw his family hanging out under an umbrella by the patio just as Dad said. Of course Jordan was off to the side talking to some girls he had probably just met. Claire was in the open sun apparently trying to bake herself into a nice golden toasty color, and Gwen was floating in the pool nearby on a massive inflatable swan. Mom and Dad were under the umbrella having a cool drink and talking.

As he started to walk over he noticed a guy at the other end of the pool lounging back in a deck chair and staring in his direction. The guy had massive wild blonde hair that danced wildly in the slightest breeze, and he was wearing a colorful Hawaiian t-shirt. Dillon almost laughed because he looked so strange, but then he suddenly got an uncomfortable feeling from him for some reason. It was weird. He knew he could get sidetracked with uncomfortable feelings and just shook it off as nerves. He cleared his mind and tried to focus on the current situation: getting Dad to the center.

Dillon took a couple of deep breaths in order to calm his nerves and began walking over to them. As he approached, Mom and Dad both looked up, smiling. "How's it going little man?" Mom asked.

"Not bad," Dillon responded, trying to be as cool as possible. "How was

town?”

“It was fun!” Mom said enthusiastically. “We saw the residential areas. Found out that they have a tropical zoo, there’s a small amusement park on the other side of the Oasis, and tons of little touristy shops with locals selling their wares. You should have come! You would have loved it!”

“Sounds great.” Dillon tried as hard as he could to sound excited. He wasn’t sure his performance was cutting it.

“What’s up man?” Dad asked. “You seem like something is bothering you?”

That’s it! Dillon figured he was done at that point. *Come on man! Get it together!* he thought to himself. “Nothing’s wrong,” he responded quickly. Then he had an idea. “I saw some cool plants around here that I didn’t recognize and I really want to go pick up a book on the local plant life. I think I saw one at the information center.”

“I guess I should be happy that *one* of our sons is interested in expanding his mind,” Dad replied sarcastically as he smirked at Jordan who just walked back from talking to his new friends. “But since when have you been into plants?”

“Oh, you know me. I love reading everything about different places,” Dillon replied with a shrug. “So … I guess I came to ask you if we could take a quick drive to the information center so I could grab that book?”

Dad visibly sighed a bit. “We just got to the pool Dillon. Does it have to be right now?”

“It’s not that far up the road,” Dillon put in urgently. He realized it sounded too insistent so he said more calmly, “It won’t take long. I don’t know what time the center closes, and it would be a great book to read while I enjoy the sun with you guys pool side.

Mom gave Dad that look, and Dillon knew he had him!

“Okay,” replied Dad resignedly. “Let me grab my keys from the room.”

“Thanks Dad! Dillon exclaimed.

Dad nodded, removed himself from the chair and headed for his room.

Mom smiled. “You boys have fun.”

Dillon nodded and smiled, but on the inside he was terrified. What if he was putting his Dad in danger by taking him there? He put the disturbing thought

away. He didn't know what else to do and besides, he had escaped the coyotes once before by himself, it should be a breeze with his Dad with him.

THEY PULLED UP TO THE CENTER AND EVERYTHING APPEARED NORMAL AT FIRST glance. There were even a few more cars in the parking lot. Dillon was surprised by this given the fact that only just over an hour had elapsed since he made his escape from the place. He didn't let the apparent normalcy of the situation deter him from being on guard though. He and Dad approached the front door together but Dillon reached for the handle first, not willing to let his unsuspecting father go in first without any idea of the situation they faced. Dillon figured that he could better respond to anything that came leaping out of there.

He opened the door quickly and launched himself into the center.

"Whoa there!" Dad exclaimed. "You really must want that book," he joked.

Dillon didn't smile.

He looked around and noticed that the place didn't seem touched at all! There were no signs of struggle and there were even a few people mingling around, looking at merchandise. As he moved through the store he noted that the one thing that was absent was Charlie, the stuffed coyote that had frightened Gwen when they first arrived. He didn't know what to think. *Was Charlie the coyote that attacked me? Was he somehow in stasis before?* None of it made sense.

"So how long did you have to wait in that traffic delay this morning on the highway," he overheard someone say as he moved over to where he had the battle with the first coyote. He paused for a moment to consider that.

Maybe that's why no one was around when Tom Tom was questioned? he thought to himself. *But who would do that?* He shook his head in confusion. Again, he had more questions than answers. First the missing stuffed coyote and now this.

When he got to the place where the coyote was he noticed that all of the racks of clothing were neatly placed and there seemed to be no sign of anything.

He climbed under one of the racks to look around.

“Dillon, what are you doing?” Dad asked as he approached.

“Oh … nothing Dad,” Dillon responded from under the rack. “I just remembered that I think I might have dropped something around here the last time we were through.” He stuck his head out from behind some T-shirts, “It just sort of hit me when we walked in.”

Dad looked at him quizzically.

His head disappeared behind the shirts again.

“Can I help you with something?”

Dad turned his head and saw a young woman approaching. She was thin, had dark brown hair, olive skin, and a nice smile. “I don’t think so,” Dad replied. “My son here thinks he might have lost something the last time we were here.”

Dillon could hear the conversation and knew that he had to exit the clothing rack so he wouldn’t draw anymore suspicion. Before he did he noticed something on the floor underneath the rack. He quickly pulled out his phone and turned on the flashlight in order to get a better look. He rubbed his hand on the surface of the floor and noticed that it had marks that appeared to be burned into the floor. “The acid drool!” He whispered to himself. He knew then that this was an elaborate coverup. He snapped a quick picture.

“No,” he said finally as he pulled himself from the floor. “It’s not here.”

“What’s not there?” Dad asked.

“Oh nothing … nothing important anyway.”

“Well if there’s anything you need just ask,” said the young woman.

“Actually …” Dillon began, “I was just wondering where Tom Tom is today?”

The woman looked at Dillon for a moment. He tried to detect if there was any obvious hesitation or clue in her look that gave him any indication that she knew the truth about Tom Tom. Her look told him nothing. “He’s not here today,” she responded.

“Where is he?” Dillon pressed.

“I believe he called in sick. At least that’s what I gathered from my boss.”

“And who might that be?” Dillon asked.

“Dillon!” Dad reprimanded. “I don’t think that’s any of your business. Now let’s get the book you were looking for and get out of here.” Dad turned to the woman, “I’m sorry,” he said. “My son is sometimes too curious for his own good.” He looked disapprovingly at Dillon.

“It’s okay,” the young woman replied and smiled at the both of them before heading back to the counter.

Dillon sheepishly offered Dad a disarming smile then scurried off to the book section before Dad could say another word to him.

This is weird. He thought to himself. *How could they get this place in order and opened again so quickly? They even have a replacement for Tom Tom! These guys (whoever they are) are good.*

Dillon was now convinced more than ever that he had to figure out this conspiracy. He knew he had to find out what had happened to Tom Tom, and he knew he had to find out what those creatures were that he escaped from. Maybe there was a clue to that in the book on desert animals that Tom Tom suggested he buy?

He went over to the book section and lingered around for a minute, all-the-while looking around trying to gauge a good opportunity to sneak away for a minute. He knew he had to get to that back room.

He peeked his head up over the shelf and noticed that Dad was at the far end of the center looking at a rack of brochures. He glanced to the left and right quickly and then ducked back down and snuck around the shelf. He weaved through the rows keeping his head lower than the racks, hoping that no one would be able to detect him.

He got to the back wall and creeped along it, stopping twice to quickly dodge behind some shelves in order to avoid another customer. He approached the corner that intersected with the hallway which led to the back room. He was about to slip around it when he felt someone tap his shoulder. He leaped around and made a short cry as the tap startled him! There, looking him in the face, was a small boy about five years of age. He stared at Dillon with his bright blue eyes.

“Whatcha doing?” he asked innocently.

“What am I doing?” Dillon whispered back in an exasperated tone. “Trying

not to die of fright because of you!”

The boy was about to say something else but Dillon put up his finger. “Shhhh,” he said quietly. “If you must know I’m a private investigator on a mission to crack a mystery.”

The boy looked at him blankly.

“Like agent Cody Banks … Spy Kids …” Dillon tried to explain.

The boy looked blankly.

“Right … that’s before your time,” he replied. “Anyway … I need to get down this hallway without being seen, and I can’t have anyone know about my mission.”

The boy nodded.

“So … you can’t tell anyone that you met me. Understand?”

The boy nodded again.

“No one,” Dillon reinforced. “Or I’m a dead man,” he said while pulling his finger across his throat dramatically in order to emphasize his point.

The boy’s eyes went wide!

“You don’t want me to die? Do you?”

The boy shook his head vigorously back and forth.

“Great! Now go and play and don’t mention a word of this to anyone,” Dillon said as he turned his head back around the corner in order to take another peek. He quickly looked back and saw the boy standing there. He motioned with his hand for him to leave. The boy, still seemingly in shock about Dillon’s statement of possible death, turned and ran back toward the front of the store. “Kids!” Dillon whispered to himself in exasperation as he shook head.

He did one more quick check to see if the coast was clear and then darted down the hallway. He made it to the end, grasped the door handle, opened it up, and slipped inside. The sight he saw shocked him! This room was in total disarray the last time he was here, merely an hour earlier and yet it was completely put back together. He walked around a little, wearily looking about and readying for an attack from a coyote, but none came. He quickly glanced around a few boxes. Nothing. He noted that the table was in exactly the location it was when he had his talk with Tom Tom and that there were no signs of a

struggle. He ran to the back door and noted that it was locked once again.

This is weird! He thought again to himself.

Before turning to leave he did notice more of the burn marks on the floor where the beast had drooled while it attacked him. *I'm not crazy!* He reaffirmed to himself pulling his phone out and taking a picture of the marred floor.

As he opened the door to leave he ran right into someone who was coming into the room. It was Troy! 'The Gate Keeper.'

"Hey man," Troy said, trying to collect himself from the shock of seeing Dillon there. "What are you doing back here?" he asked in amazement, clearly not expecting to see him.

Dillon was stunned for a moment, "I … ah … was just looking for the restroom. I obviously took the wrong way."

Troy smiled. "No problem," he said. "It's just down the hallway to your left."

Dillon smiled weakly. "What are you doing here?" He dared to asked.

"Me? Oh lots of us at the resort have to do double, triple, quadruple duties around the place. I was asked to come and count inventory today," he replied with his bright, infectious, smile.

Dillon nodded and slipped by the man.

"Bye Dillon!" he heard Troy call after him. He turned slightly and offered a small wave, trying not to appear too guilty of having snooped around. He knew in his head that he wasn't very convincing.

As soon as Dillon exited the hallway he grabbed his Dad and told him it was time to go.

"Did you get your book?" Dad asked.

"No … it … ah … wasn't in. They must have sold all the copies."

Dad shrugged and headed for the door with his son.

Dillon silently berated himself for not actually going to the restroom after he was caught by Troy. He felt that he really wasn't good at this whole "thinking on his feet" sort of thing. He knew he would need to get better at it if he wanted to crack the case without drawing suspicion to himself. Sarah's words of warning rang out again in his mind: "You have to promise me that you won't do anything stupid like going to look for this *entrance."* He just pushed her words aside.

There's too much going on here, he said to himself.

Before leaving the center he glanced back and surveyed the room that he barely escaped merely an hour ago. It was too surreal! He knew he needed to get help, but he also knew that no one would believe him. The only one who would believe him is Sarah, but he really didn't want to have a verbal reprimand from her right now. No one else around here would be remotely accepting of his circumstance except maybe one person. It was a long shot. A really long shot. But he knew he had to try.

JORDAN WAS ENJOYING THIS PLACE! IT HAD EVERYTHING HE NEEDED: LOTS OF sun, a great pool, cute girls his age, and all you could eat. He wasn't even concerned about not being able to game while at the resort which was incredibly shocking, even for him! He lounged back in his chair that was poolside, soaking up the rays, and sucking back on his virgin margarita. This was the life!

"Hey man," he heard as Dillon approached with Dad. "Enjoying yourself?" Dillon asked.

"Oh ya," came Jordan's response. "You should try it on the other side of the pool. Away from me. There's nothing like it."

Dillon shrugged off the sleight and sat down beside him looking around, trying not to appear too anxious. He noted that Mom and Gwen were out in the pool and that Dad was getting ready to join them. Not too far from Jordan was Claire who was reclining on her chair and appeared to be in a coma. She had always been a deep sleeper which Dillon knew would work to his advantage.

"What's up man?" asked Jordan, his eyes still closed and a slight smile on his face. He appeared to be in total relax mode.

"Oh nothing," Dillon replied, pausing until Dad was no longer in earshot. "Okay man," Dillon suddenly said as he leaned closer to his brother. "Something really creepy is going on here!" He whispered as loud as he dared.

The suddenness of Dillon's response startled Jordan. He looked over at him skeptically. "What are you talking about goof?" he responded.

Dillon leaned in further and explained the whole thing, constantly looking around to see if anyone was watching. Jordan seemed to listen. At times, however, he would snort or scoff a little, especially when Dillon tried to explain the coyote incident. Dillon continued anyway. When he was done Jordan stared at him for a moment, then a huge smile spread across his face.

"Nice try Dillon," he said with a chuckle. "Interesting story. Too bad it's all in your head. I've always said that you have a pretty awesome imagination. This one is one of your better ones." He put his head back down and closed his eyes again.

"I'm not imagining things!" Dillon replied, his voice rising a little louder than he wanted. Claire stirred a bit in her chair. "There's something going on here and we need to figure out what it is."

"Uh huh," was the only response he received from his brother.

"I have proof!" Dillon exclaimed, pulling out his phone. "Look at these pictures."

That caught Jordan's attention.

"These are spots on the floor at the information center where the thing drooled acidic saliva. And this … " he looked around cautiously as he showed Jordan the small burn that was on his hand.

Jordan pulled his sunglasses off in order to get a better look. Then he laughed and sat back on the chair, dismissing the "evidence" with a wave. "Good one Dil. You almost had me."

Dillon's face went red. "Ahhhh … Why did I even try to talk to you about this?" he said in exasperation as he got up from his chair.

"Have fun on your little adventure," he heard Jordan say as he stormed away.

DILLON LAID IN BED FLIPPING THROUGH THE BOOK ON JOHN TAYLOR SEBASTIAN. He could hear Jordan's snores lightly in the background. As he flipped through he was drawn to the pictures and spent a long time looking at them. He would have loved to have gotten to meet John and his crew. He flipped the page and

noted the picture that had John alone leaning down unearthing a find he had discovered on one of his previous digs. The man looked so focussed on what he was doing. As Dillon looked closer something caught his eye. There was something hanging from his belt but he couldn't quite make it out. He quickly grabbed his phone, switched on the camera, pointed it at the picture and zoomed in. Even though the picture was terribly pixilated he just knew what it was and almost fell over! He quickly grabbed his backpack and rummaged through it until he found … the watch! He flipped the watch over and stared in disbelief at the writing that was on the back: JTS! John Taylor Sebastian! This actually was his watch!

"How could this be?" Dillon whispered to himself.

Then it struck him! Someone wanted him to come here. Someone somehow planted this watch for him to find. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up.

Dillon's heart pounded furiously in his chest with the revelation that someone, for whatever reason, lured Dillon and his family here.

But who? And why?

14

DILLON AND DEREK

Dillon looked around nervously. Everything was dark except for the light glow of something that was emanating off the wall. It was enough to be able to make out shapes but it didn't produce enough light to manage the tunnels safely. He reached in his pocket and pulled out his phone. The screen seemed dim. He noticed that there were no bars of service. Quickly he scrolled the screen upwards and pushed on the flashlight function. The light came on for a moment, then began to dim. He noticed that the battery indicator on the home screen was slowly being depleting. He knew he had charged the phone before leaving his room which made him realize now that something must be causing a disturbance with his electronics. But what?

He tried to control his breathing as the seconds ticked by as he thought about his predicament. His eyes went to the tunnel wall as he shined the dimming light of his phone upon its surface. There on the wall he could clearly make out the symbol of the eye in the pentagram surrounded by the square. His heart began to pound and he felt as though it would leap out of his chest at any moment. Dillon closed his eyes as he tried to get a hold of his wild imagination. He could feel the cold sweat of his palms and the only thing he could hear was the sound of his own breathing.

He opened his eyes and stared at the symbol as the light waned. The symbol faded from his sight as his phone went dead leaving him in the dark.

DILLON WOKE WITH A CHILL. HE LOOKED AROUND GROGGILY AND NOTICED THAT he was in his hotel room. The sheets of his bed were scattered everywhere as though he had a fight with some unseen monster. He looked over to see his brother snoozing soundly without a care in the world.

"I wish," he whispered to himself as he pulled his tired body from bed and headed to the restroom. Every time he had one of these weird dreams he felt as though he was hit by a truck when he woke up. It wasn't the most restful of sleeps.

After splashing some water on his face he jumped into the shower. He couldn't get the dream out of his head.

What could it mean? he asked himself. *Obviously there is some reality to it,* he reasoned as he knew that he first saw the symbol in a dream before he even saw it in the real world.

How is that even possible? he questioned himself as he scrubbed his hair thoroughly.

Do these dreams mean that the things I see in them are going to happen? That thought sent a chill up his spine as he remembered the dream where he and Gwen jumped off that cliff in order to flee from those spider-like creatures. He shook his head in disbelief. *No,* he reasoned. *They can't be that detailed. Can they?*

After he finished getting ready he called his Mom on her phone and asked where and when they were having breakfast. While he spoke to her he couldn't get the dreams out of his head. He seriously considered telling her what was happening to him, but he didn't even know where to start with a conversation like that. *"By the way Mom, I'm having these dreams that I think might actually come true! Ya that would sound normal,"* he thought to himself.

He shook off those thoughts. "I don't think Jordan is going to make it," he said into the phone as he glanced over at his nearly-in-a-coma brother. "I'll see you guys in a minute then," he finished as he hung up.

"Well bro … see ya whenever you wake up." Jordan grumbled something

and rolled over. Dillon seriously considered waking him up as he wasn't keen on being by himself right now, even just walking to breakfast. He knew something was happening here; something he was now a part of, whether he liked to be or not. And it was really creeping him out.

He and the rest of his family had a great breakfast. It almost made Dillon forget about all the troubling events that had happened to him since he got to the resort except for the fact that he couldn't get it all out of his head.

It must have been noticeable on his face as Mom looked over and asked, "Are you okay honey? You look tired."

"What … oh … I'm okay," he stammered. "I just didn't get much sleep last night."

In truth he didn't feel okay with the events he was caught up in. He didn't know which way to go. He knew he couldn't confide in anyone as no one would believe him. He also knew that there seemed to be powerful forces behind the disappearances of John Taylor Sebastian and now Tom Tom which was evidenced by the speed at which the information center was cleaned up after his encounter with the coyotes. And who was that mysterious man who was talking with Tom Tom? Dillon knew he probably hadn't heard the last of him. The question he had, however, was what role he played in the disappearance of Tom Tom if any? It seemed weird that the mystery man would just leave and then come back to take the old man away when he had a perfectly good opportunity to do just that when it was just the two of them at the center. That man also didn't have time to come back and abduct Tom Tom as Dillon was still there fighting the coyote when he disappeared. And the way he spoke about John seemed to suggest that he wanted to find him which indicated that there were probably two groups of people at play here.

If that was the case then who was the other group? And were they the ones who sent the coyotes? Where did they even get coyotes like that anyway? And were the coyotes meant for Tom Tom or for him? That last thought troubled him

the most. The events seemed to suggest just that. The coyote in the center might have been meant for Tom Tom but not the ones in the desert. Those were definitely gunning for him! There's no other reasonable explanation for it.

Finally Dillon decided that he would take it easy for a bit with his family, but not let his guard down. He determined to stay with at least one member from his family, if possible, and keep in plain view of others just in case the unknown assailants sent something else his way. He felt that this would be the safest course. Maybe some other piece of evidence would surface in the meantime?

As they were just finishing up their delicious breakfast of eggs, bacon, toast, fresh fruit, and the like Jordan stumbled their way. He looked rough!

"Tough night son?" Dad asked as he approached.

Jordan grumbled.

Gwen laughed.

"Well … when you're done I think we're all just going to lounge at the pool for a bit and then maybe head into town and check out that amusement park," Mom stated. "You wanna come?"

Jordan nodded.

"Man of few words," Dad said as he laughed and went in for some more bacon.

After breakfast Dillon headed back to his room in order to get his swim gear. He was still hesitant to walk there alone, but he figured he would be safe in the midst of a crowded resort. Besides, he knew Jordan would be along momentarily which calmed him a bit.

As the elevator door closed he heard the distinctive chime of his phone go off that indicated he was receiving a text. He pulled his phone out and looked at the screen. The blood drained from his face.

"We know what you've been up to," the message said. Dillon felt his knees go weak. Then the phone rang and he felt the elevator suddenly stopped, but the door didn't open. The phone rang and rang as he pushed the open door button. Nothing. All the phone said was, "Unknown Caller."

He let it ring until his voicemail picked it up. Silence. He could feel his heart pound in his chest and could hear his breathing. He pushed the open door button

again. Nothing. Then the phone rang again. “Unknown Caller,” it said again.

He slid the bar on the touch screen and put the phone to his ear. “Hullo,” he said, his voice barely audible.

“Hi Dillon,” came the reply. The voice was deep and unnatural. It was obviously being masked by a voice changing device. “We know that you’ve been looking into things that a boy your age shouldn’t concern himself with.”

Dillon was silent, not knowing how to respond.

“Why don’t you just enjoy your vacation with your family. I’m sure they wouldn’t want you to get hurt.” There was a long pause as Dillon was too scared to say anything. “And I’m sure you wouldn’t want anything to happen to them, would you?”

The elevator door suddenly opened and Dillon shrieked as a little girl about Gwen’s age ran into the elevator with her Dad startling him. The girl’s Dad actually flinched a little at Dillon’s outburst.

“You okay kid?” he asked as he carefully moved around Dillon.

Dillon nodded his head rapidly as he ran out into the hallway and toward his room. He burst through the door and slammed it shut behind him.

What is happening here! he screamed in his head. He took a few deep breaths in order to calm himself down. When he was able to think clearly again he replayed the conversation in his mind.

“Okay … okay …” he said aloud. “Obviously these people, whoever they are, don’t want me snooping around.” He paused, deep in thought. “Which is probably because there *is* something they don’t want me to find.” It was weird to him, but that line of reasoning seemed to calm him down more and actually intrigued him.

“But what about the veiled threat?” he voiced. Now he knew he was stuck. He didn’t want anyone to get hurt, especially his family, but he had a strong desire to find out what these people were hiding.

Would they actually harm a twelve year old kid? he mused. “Well if the coyotes were any indication,” he said aloud as he started to pace, “then I guess the answer is yes.”

He flopped down on his bed. No, he realized. The risk was too much for him

to keep going with this. The man on the phone only warned him to stop which implied that if he got out now then nothing bad would happen and he could enjoy the rest of his vacation.

He grabbed the watch from his pack and looked at it, rubbing his thumb over the initials ‘JTS.’ The one thing he couldn’t figure out is who was the one who made sure he would find this? That thought troubled him as it suggested that there was someone pushing him in this direction, but he knew now he couldn’t go where they wanted him to. He would have to give up the chase.

“Sorry John,” he said as he put the watch back. “I’m sure someone else is looking for you.”

DILLON FELT AS THOUGH A WEIGHT HAD BEEN LIFTED OFF HIS CHEST NOW THAT he had made the decision to leave the mystery alone, and he was actually enjoying himself at the pool with his family. He was still confused about the dreams he was having, but he put them out of his mind and decided to focus on having fun and enjoy his vacation. After an hour of pool-time the Hunts boarded the bus and headed to town. The town site was actually really kind of quaint. There were nice houses scattered about and many residents were out and about on their daily business. Tons of tourists walked through town and into the many shops that were splayed throughout. There was one big strip in the downtown core where most of the touristy shops were. The bus rolled through downtown then took another side street which led right to the amusement park.

The park itself was full of rides and games. Much like what you would see at any amusement park. In fact it seemed really out of place from the rest of Oasis. Most of the place was quiet and serene whereas the park was wild, loud, and entertaining. It was obviously put here in order to generate more money for the town by keeping the tourists happy. And boy did it ever attract the tourists! The place was packed!

At the entrance to the grounds the people who were staying at the hotel, like the Hunts, checked in to acquire their bracelets which allowed them access to the

rides and provided a way to charge their room for the items they purchased. Dillon thought this was a really slick way of doing it.

“Okay, we all need to stay together” Mom stated as they entered.

Jordan rolled his eyes. A move that Mom didn’t see, but Dad saw it and got the message. He gave the boys a wink. “I think the boys can go off on their own if they want. We can always have them do a check in text, honey.”

Mom paused for a moment before responding. “Well, okay … I guess,” she conceded.

“You guys have fun but make sure you stay together,” Dad put in, trying to calm Mom’s hesitancy.

Jordan and Dillon nodded.

“And give us a call if you have any problems,” Mom put in.

Jordan sighed. “You guys worry too much,” he replied. “Come on twerp,” he turned to Dillon and motioned for him to follow.

THE PARK DEFINITELY EXCEEDED ALL THE BOY’S EXPECTATIONS! JORDAN AND Dillon went on ride after ride, scarfed down cotton candy, ice cream, and pop, and even managed to get in a few of those carny games that most people can’t win at. The only damper to the fun was when they were riding the Ferris Wheel and got stuck! They were nearing the bottom when the power suddenly cut out.

“You gotta be kidding!” they heard one of the ride conductors exclaim in exasperation. “These power outages have been occurring more frequently. Someone has to fix this!”

His co-conductor nodded in agreement as they both busied themselves with making sure all the switches were in the right position.

As Dillon looked around he noticed that it wasn’t just their ride that was down, but that the whole park was taking a hit.

“Man! I’d hate to be those guys in the rollercoaster right now,” Jordan said with a laugh as he pointed over to where the coaster was. It didn’t get enough of a boost half way through the track in order to make it through some of the twists

and turns and so some of the riders were stuck in awkward positions.

Dillon nodded his agreement. Thankfully all these outages seemed to be only for a brief time, but he thought that it was weird that a resort this sophisticated would be having this many power problems. Then again, they really were literally in the middle of the desert—hundreds of miles away from any other civilization, and Tara, the bike shop lady, did mention that they were upgrading the system which should solve these problems.

“Hey man, you hungry?” Jordan said to Dillon after they finally were able to exit the ride when the power came back on.

Dillon looked at him in disbelief! “After all that stuff we just ate you’re still hungry?” he scoffed.

“Ya,” Jordan replied. “I’m sixteen you know,” he said as though that should have explained it all. “Don’t worry twerp, you’ll be the same way in a few years.”

Dillon was sceptical as he never could understand how someone Jordan’s size (which was pretty average) could put away so much food and have nothing to show for it!

“Why don’t you grab a spot for us over there.” Jordan motioned to an outdoor patio area.

Dillon worked his way through the crowd and found an empty table by the railing on the edge of the area beside the walkway that led through the park. This amusement park was a much needed distraction for the young boy in order to help get his mind off things. But anytime he had a moment to himself his thoughts started to drift to the circumstances he had been a part of. And every time he sat down, he would feel the exhaustion of poor sleep creeping up on him. He still wondered how he would be able to get help in dealing with the situation. He took a deep breath and remembered that all he had to do was stay out of it. Even so he was really troubled by the fact that he was almost killed and he couldn’t even tell his parents about it! Jordan, the only one in his family who he thought might remotely believe him, except for Gwen— who would be of no help to him—had dismissed his supposedly “wild imaginary adventure.” He knew something strange was going on and that someone had targeted him

specifically. The thought frightened him. He shook his head. *Just stay out of it*, he reminded himself again.

"You having fun?" came a man's voice. Dillon jumped a little as he was jolted from his thoughts. He looked up to see those piercing blue eyes and shaven scalp which sported the asian writing tattoo he had seen a couple days earlier in the stairway. It was Derek!

"Oh … sorry for startling you," Derek replied with a smile. "I just saw a friendly face and thought you could use some company."

"It's … ah … okay," Dillon responded, trying to collect himself.

"You looked like you were deep in thought," Derek prodded. "Everything okay?"

"Ya … ya … I was just … just thinking about the next ride I was going to take."

"You know," began Derek, "you're a terrible liar Dillon."

Dillon was dumbfounded! He didn't know what to say next! Derek had called him out and he was like a mouse trapped in a corner with a huge cat ready to pounce on him. He was frightened. Then it struck him. That voice! He knew that voice! Derek was the one who was talking to Tom Tom!

Dillon squirmed, not knowing what to say next.

"Don't worry Dillon," Derek finally said at length, "you and I are on the same team." He smiled and leaned casually on the railing, trying to disarm the kid.

"I … but …" Dillon tried desperately to say something but it just wasn't coming out.

"Don't say anything," Derek replied. "Just listen. If you do that then a lot of your questions will be answered. Understand?"

Dillon nodded.

"I work for a group of people called The Orion Group who were assisting John Taylor Sebastian to find something for us. Obviously the people who have what we need didn't want Mr. Sebastian to discover it." He paused for effect then said, "His disappearance, as I'm sure you're aware of by now, was no accident." He looked around, as though he was making sure that no one was

listening in on them. Dillon looked around as well out of reflex.

Derek turned back to Dillon. His eyes almost piercing through him. “We were getting nowhere with our investigation and decided that your unique abilities would be useful to us.”

“What abilities?” Dillon asked.

“You can find things, Dillon. Things no one else seems to be able to find. And, with you looking with us, we’re certain we can find what we’re looking for.”

“I don’t want trouble,” Dillon said.

“Unfortunately, our enemies have already noticed you poking around. You need us, Dillon, just like we need you. That’s why I’ve chosen to make contact.” Dillon swallowed hard, trying to digest the news.

“They … whoever *they* are, have also made contact and warned me to stay away from this.”

Derek look hard at him.

“They threatened harm to me and my family if I didn’t drop it.”

“My employer doesn’t want to see that happen,” Derek was quick to add, “and we can offer protection until this thing is over,” he said, trying to reassure the young boy. “But we need the use of your gifts.”

Dillon had about a thousand questions he wanted to asked but none of them would surface as he was still in shock by Derek’s admissions.

Derek must have noticed this by the look on Dillon’s face. “Yes,” he said, “we were the ones who got your family the free vacation. I planted the watch that you found when you were playing in the forest by your house, and I was also the one who dropped the arrow head for you to find in the gas station parking lot. These are all items of John’s we managed to acquire and we are sure they’re clues to finding where he was taken, but without your help we don’t think we will be able to do this.”

“But how did you know I was going to find them?” Dillon was able to ask.

Derek smiled. “By all accounts It was guaranteed that you would find them due to the gifts you possess.”

“By whose account? How do you know me? How long have you been

watching me? What are these gifts you keep talking about?" Dillon blurted.

Derek waved a hand in the air trying to signal for Dillon to lower his voice. "I don't have time to explain this to you. All you need to do is agree to help us. We can't do this without you."

Dillon was silent. Again, Sarah's voice rang out in his head in warning, and so did the deep-voiced man.

"John needs you," Derek emphasized. "We think he's still alive but he might not be for much longer if we can't find out what happened to him. Whether you choose to help us or not, you and your family are now in danger. These people won't stop at a threat. And, as I said, if you agree to help us, we can offer you protection."

That last statement removed all hesitation from Dillon and silenced Sarah and the deep-voiced man in his head. He truly did want to find out what happened to John, and if he was able to do something to help save the man's life then he would do it. He just hoped that Derek's offer of protection was enough to keep his family safe.

He nodded.

"Great," replied Derek. "I have to go now, but I'll be in touch real soon. We have to act quickly." With that Derek spun around and, before walking into the crowd said, "One last thing Dillon. Don't tell anyone about this. We don't want more people getting hurt"

Dillon nodded as the blood drained from his face. That statement of them having to act quickly relieved Dillon a little as he now knew he had some direction that he needed to pursue, and that it was going to happen soon, but the comment about "getting hurt" did not sit well with him. He hated the idea of not knowing what to do. And he *definitely* wasn't fond of the idea of getting hurt, whether it was himself or someone else.

"Hey man," said Jordan as he approached the table with a huge tray of food and a drink for Dillon. "I thought you could use this," he said as he placed the monster drink in front of his brother. "Who was that you were talking to?" he asked.

"Who … oh him?" Dillon tried to play it cool. "No one. Just a guy I met in

the stairway at the resort. I guess he remembered me from a couple days ago and wanted to talk." Dillon sucked back on his pop.

"Right … " replied Jordan sceptically.

Man! I am terrible at this lying thing! Dillon lamented to himself. He continued a long pull on his straw draining half his drink in a matter of seconds. Jordan stared at him for what seemed to be an eternity trying to get him to share more. Dillon looked away pretending to be interested in something else. Jordan stared for another second then unwrapped his lunch and began eating.

"That's pretty cool," Dillon said as he pointed to a nearby ride.

"Ah huh," was all Jordan said with a mouth full of food.

The rest of the time that Dillon had to kill watching his brother eat his burger and avoid answering any direct questions was soooo painful! He knew that Jordan didn't believe him and he wanted to tell him the truth because maybe he would believe him this time, but he couldn't. The last people he wanted to be harmed were members of his family—no matter how annoying they were at times. No. He knew he had to do this alone and trust in this stranger who had just confided in him. What other choice did he have?

15

THE HAUNTED HOUSE

Derek walked into the small restaurant and slipped his sunglasses off, stowing them on his neck with the glasses facing backward. He quickly scanned the booths and noticed Jake sitting at the far table seemingly engrossed in something he had pulled up on his tablet. Derek quickly made his way over and slipped into the seat opposite Jake.

"Well?" came Jake's immediate question without even looking away from his screen.

Derek paused for a moment before he responded. It wasn't till Jake looked up from his tablet and starred Derek in the eyes that he spoke what was on his mind. "I don't like involving the boy. Can't we call it off, send them away or something?" he stated flatly.

"Why the sudden change to heart?" Jake asked.

"Dillon has already been compromised," Derek stated. "They have made contact with him and warned him not to get involved or something bad will happen to him or his family."

"That's unfortunate," Jake said, rather coldly. "But we can't deviate from the plan. He was involved the moment we made it so and we need to see it through."

"We have to bring in some more operatives to help keep the Hunts safe now."

Jake nodded. "I'll make the call."

"We need them here right away," Derek stated emphatically. "Dillon is in

real danger now, and it's only a matter of time before he disappears as well."

"Can I get you something?" said the waitress who noticed Derek come in and sit down at the booth.

"Just coffee," he said as he glanced up at her.

She smiled softly and padded away.

"You've made your point clear Derek," Jake continued with the conversation after the waitress left. "But do you really think they would be bold enough to take a twelve year old boy from his family because he's asking a few questions? I don't think the resort would want that kind of publicity." He almost seemed indignant at Derek's suggestion.

"I know they tried to kill Dillon once with the use of the necrotoxin enhanced creatures," Derek stated. "I caught a glimpse of Dillon speeding through the desert on his bike when I was heading back to the resort after talking with Tom Tom. I was pulling out of the information center parking lot and onto the highway when I noticed a couple of the things in pursuit of him." Derek paused as the waitress came over with his coffee. When she was gone out of earshot he continued. "I knew Dillon was going to be hard pressed to make it so I tried to buy him some time by firing some shots at the creatures in order to get their attention while Dillon sped away. Thankfully he made it."

"And that was lucky for us," Jake cut in.

Derek's eyes went wide.

"And of course lucky for the boy," Jake was quick to add, trying to pacify Derek's shock at the cold statement. "I don't want any more harm to come to the boy than you do," Jake continued. Derek scoffed at that remark, having had a lot of experience dealing with Jake over the years. "*But* …" Jake continued, dismissing Derek's clear sign of distrust of his statement, "… we need him. You know that as much as I do. Dillon is the key to help us save more lives."

Derek sat back in silence. After a moment of digesting the information he relaxed, grabbed his coffee, and took a sip. He knew Jake was right, no matter how much he hated what they were doing to the boy. The problem for him was that he didn't realize how dangerous this mission was going to be when they first conscripted Dillon who was, back then, totally unaware of what was going on to

him. Now the stakes were much higher, and he wasn't comfortable with them.

"Okay then," Derek said finally. "Where do we go from here?"

Jake smiled. "We move to the next stage of our plan. We need to get the boy to the house."

AFTER JORDAN WAS FINISHED EATING, THE TWO BROTHERS DECIDED TO EXPLORE the other side of the park they haven't been to yet. There were dozens of more rides over there. They hit a couple of quick ones—the lines having died down during lunch—which the boys thought was awesome! As they walked through trying to plan out their next adrenaline rush Jordan noticed the haunted house.

"Awesome!" he said as he ran toward it. Dillon followed closely behind.

As they approached and were about to enter, the ride operator stopped them. He was a short middle-aged man with greying hair. "Sorry boys, but you have to go alone on this ride."

"What! Why?" Jordan blurted.

"For effect of course," was the man's reply. "We try to give all our guests the best possible experience. And, obviously for a haunted house, the best experience is to scare the pants off you *by yourself*."

Dillon's face went pale. He had enough frightful excitement so far on this trip. He wasn't sure he wanted to go seeking for it now.

"Oh awesome!" Jordan replied. "That's a great setup." He looked back at Dillon. His face showed that he didn't seem keen on the idea. "You're not scared are you?" he chided.

"What … me … no, of course not," he replied, trying to talk himself into manning up to the ride.

"Good. Because I'd hate for your friends at home to find out how you chickened out of a little haunted house in a theme park," Jordan said, implying that he would never let this go if he didn't go in.

Dillon swallowed hard. He knew what he had to do. "Fine," he said. "I'll go first." He walked up to the entrance and into the house.

Before he entered, the operator of the house grabbed his arm. “This house isn’t for the feint of heart,” he said with a deadly serious tone. “Beware the demons,” he stated as he let go of him.

The door had the word “MURDER” written over it in what appeared to be blood, and there were ghostly sounds coming from different directions as Dillon approached. Of course Dillon knew that this was all part of the show. He had been in one of these houses before when he and his family visited the amusement park that wasn’t far from the town they lived in. Still, due to recent circumstances, he couldn’t help but be a little on edge.

He entered and the place was dark at first then there was a flash of light and something whipped across his path. He couldn’t make it out but figured that it was probably someone pretending to be a ghost. Then the lights came on and flickered in intermittent patterns simulating an electrical short. The hair on the back of Dillon’s neck stood up. The mood was creepy. The walls were stained with what appeared to be blood and there were fingernail marks down the one side, portraying as though someone was sucked into the house against their will. There was a musty old smell in the air, and he could hear really faint sounds of high-pitched shrieks and low growls.

As Dillon walked down the corridor he felt something buzz his head from behind and continue on down the hall. He twitched and jumped to the side, eyes searching the gloom. “Must’ve been a simulated bat,” he reasoned with himself. With a swallow, he pushed on.

The sounds were getting louder: women screams, low guttural growls of some unseen creature, and howling of souls being tormented.

He got to the end of the hall and turned the corner. As he did, a hand came out of the wall and touched his shoulder. He jumped and launched himself against the opposite wall. Two more hands came out and grabbed him. He pulled away; his heart pounding furiously. *It’s just a ride*, he told himself as he tried to keep his distance from the edges of the hallway as he jogged away from where the hands were. He hit something sticky: spider webs! As he pulled them from his face he noticed that the hall opened up to the top and the path wound down. At the top of the opened hall was a huge spider. He let out a shriek and jumped

back, suddenly having the image in his head about the spiders he and Gwen were running from in his dreams. In its legs appeared to be the body of a person that was being wound up in its web. He rubbed his eyes then looked closer at it. No. He could tell that it was definitely a fake by the way the thing moved. His breath came easier and his heart slowed as he calmed himself down. “Get it together Dillon. This is just a ride,” he said aloud to himself.

Dillon put his head down and ran under the spider. As he came out the other side he thought he saw movement of something off to the side. He noticed a large vent at the base of the wall to his left and swore he saw movement from within, and a flicker of yellow. He didn’t stay there long enough to figure it out and instead ran to the end of the hall where there was a closed door. Dillon tried to open it but it was locked. As he shook it he heard large footsteps coming from behind him. He glanced back to see a massive guy who had to have been at least seven feet tall and built like a body builder! His face appeared to be zombie-like: dead and rotting. And his clothes were tattered, blood-satined, and barely hanging on. He lumbered toward Dillon methodically. In his massive arms he held a wicked looking axe. It was huge with a serrated edge and had a point on it that was probably a foot long with cruel looking barbs all over it. Dillon worked the door harder. The zombie was almost there. He tugged and pushed. He glanced back and saw that the zombie was raising his axe.

“This is just a ride,” he said to himself again. “Come on!” he screamed at the door.

The zombie had his axe fully overhead. *Was this just a ride?* Dillon began to question himself. He pushed hard on the door. It flung open and Dillon fell into the room beyond just as the zombie’s axe came down. He heard the thud of it hit the floor and the door slammed shut on its own. Dillon breathed a sigh of relief, then pulled himself up.

He noticed that he was in a octagonal-shaped room. Each side of the room had full-length mirrors on them which reached all the way to the roof; about ten feet from the floor. As he looked into the mirrors he noticed something strange: there were images of disembodied people coming up behind him. He turned around, but no one was actually there. Now looking in the opposite mirror, he

noticed the same thing. The figures were of attractive women who were seemingly moving their hands over his head and shoulders. It was weird because he started to actually feel as though there was something touching him. He swatted where he felt the sensations but nothing changed. This went on for a moment as he looked into different mirrors. As he stared into one the woman looked at him, then her eyes went red, and she bared some massive fangs and hissed at him! He could hear the sound of the hissing as though it was right on top of him. Dillon jumped back and looked somewhere else, but that woman did the same thing. He spun around and almost screamed out. It was as though they were taunting him. This went on for what seemed an eternity. Eventually Dillon closed his eyes. After a few seconds the sounds of horror stopped and he could feel that the entire floor he was on was moving up. He opened his eyes to see the mirrors fade from view as he ascended. Before the last of the mirrors disappeared, he caught the glimpse of something yellow. His heart began to race.

It was at this point that the young boy wanted off the ride, but he knew there was no way back. He had to complete what he started. The floor came to stop in a creepy looking, low lit, ancient library. There were bookshelves against three of the walls, a desk was over to the right, and there appeared to be a body laying on the desk with a knife sticking out of its back.

“Great …” Dillon found himself say aloud as he noticed the body.

He looked around the room and noted that the door was behind him. He had no desire to check out the real-looking body! He just turned right for the door. As he reached for the handle a knife landed in the door, missing his head by inches! He spun around to see a ghoulish-looking creature crouched on the desk beside the dead man. He was flipping another knife in his hand. Dillon went for the handle again. Another knife slammed into the door. Dillon’s heart was pounding. Mostly because he was now wondering if this was part of the ride or if this guy was actually trying to kill him!

He quickly grabbed the handle and pulled. “Of course!” he lamented out loud. “Why would the stupid door open in a haunted house?”

The ghoul smiled as he flipped another knife in the air. Then the book shelves started to moved back and forth and books started to fly all over the

place. Dillon noticed that there was a passage behind one of the shelves. He ran for the opening. A knife landed near him and the shelf closed over the passageway. It began to open again and another knife landed near him. He had to dodge some of the flying books as well. One hit him in the arm and he noted that it felt more like styrofoam than an actual book. This helped him remember that it was just a ride. The passage opened again and he launched himself through. It closed behind him leaving him in the dark for a second, then the lights came on; a really dull red light that barely lit up the hall.

Okay, I've had enough of this, he thought to himself. *Time for the ride to end.*

The long hallway looked rather plain. It appeared to be built of rotting wood that could fall apart at any moment. There were three windows on each side of the hallway which had tattered sheets hanging across them that were swaying in, what seemed to be, a breeze from the outside. At the end of the hallway there was a large hole in the wall with a big sign over it that read "Escape!" The sign was huge, appeared to be written in blood, and was glowing brightly in the dimly lit passage. But the eeriest thing was that the faint sounds of high-pitched shrieks and low growls had disappeared, leaving him looking down the long hall with just the sound of the breeze coming through the windows.

As Dillon took his first step he heard the floor boards creek loudly under his weight. As he walked slowly down the hallway he began to hear ghoulish screams and groans coming from the hole. "Oh that's better!" he said to himself sarcastically. Then he saw movement to the left at that top of the wall. There was another vent. As he stared at the vent for a moment he suddenly saw two yellow dots appear, almost like eyes staring at him.

He turned from the vent and started to pick up the pace as he went, not wanting to draw this out anymore. When he walked by one of the windows he moved the sheet aside slightly and noticed that the windows were barred. He also noted the many people strolling up and down the boardwalk beside the haunted house. They appeared to be having fun going from ride to ride, game to game. How he wanted to be outside again! He refocussed on the exit and increased his pace even more. Suddenly a trap door opened from above and a body that was strung up with a rope around his neck came crashing down in

front of him. It was pale, covered in blood, and seemed very realistic. Dillon jumped back and another one dropped from behind him. They began to extend their arms.

Dillon dodged around the one in front and another two dropped. He threw himself against the wall and squirmed by them. He was only a few yards away from the escape hole now. He rushed toward it and another two dropped before he got there but he burst through, trying not to touch them as much as he could. He knew in his head that they weren't real but he couldn't resist being freaked out in the moment. His emotions took charge and not his logic.

He made it to the hole and was about to climb inside when he heard a sickly hissing sound come from behind. He knew he shouldn't look but he just couldn't resist his curiosity. He turned his head back to see a giant-looking rat with glowing yellow eyes quickly dodging through the field of corpses and coming right for him. That was it! Dillon had enough and launched himself into the hole headfirst.

He felt himself sliding. He realized then that the escape was actually a slide. He felt himself tumbling and turning as the slide went to the left and then to the right. It was dimly lit inside from small pinholes that were in the top of it which apparently let the natural light from outside come in to illuminate enough of the interior so that the rider could see a little as he slid down the twisting turning ride.

Dillon screamed as he tumbled. He knew at this point that the slide was not meant for you to go down on your stomach but, unfortunately, he was now committed as he twisted and turned, scraping a hand here and a knee there. Dillon turned sharply to the right and then burst through the exit which had wide strips of dark soft plastic material hanging down from the roof which worked as the covering for the door.

The light of the outside stung his eyes as he flew through the door. He found himself on the side of the haunted house at the end of the slide that was cleverly decorated as a graveyard. No one walking by could see the slide exit so as not to ruin the surprise for those who go through the house.

He pulled himself from the slide and promptly made it through the exit and

around to the front of the house. The ride operator turned and smiled at the clearly disturbed boy.

“Well?” he asked with a mischievous smile.

“Well what?” Dillon fumed. “You trying to kill someone?” he yelled.

“I told you that the house is not for the feint of heart,” the operator replied without concern.

“That’s an understatement!” Dillon exclaimed.

“What part scared you the most?” asked the operator. “The people we hire are very good at what they do and we have spared no expense for the visual effects like what you saw in the room of mirrors. I believe that’s my favourite part,” he said tipping his nose up slightly in a smug expression.

“Oh ya … very good,” replied Dillon sarcastically. Actually he did think that the room of mirrors was very good, especially how they incorporated blasts of wind around you which helped to simulate the creatures in the mirrors touching you. He silently berated himself for not keeping more cool and understanding that was what they were doing to simulate their touch. It seemed his apparently legendary observational skills took a hike when he was under emotional distress!

“No really … ?” asked the operator. “What was the scariest part?”

Dillon had now sufficiently calmed down in order to think rationally about the question. He tilted his head down as he began to think. *The knife throwing ghoul was pretty scary,* he thought to himself. *But then there was that first giant with the axe … No … I would have to say …*

Dillon turned to face the operator again. The operator looked at him with amusement. “I think the icing on the cake with your house was the rat,” Dillon said with certainty. “Yep … The rat was the scariest even though I only saw it for a moment.”

The operator looked perplexed. “What rat?” he asked.

Dillon laughed. “You know … the one at the end? You’re just trying to scare me more,” he chuckled.

The operator remained stone-faced. “We don’t have a rat in the house.”

The blood drained from Dillon’s face. The image of the rat came clearly to him again and he noticed the same kind of eyes he saw in the coyotes! He knew

then that someone had tried to kill him again. His thoughts spun. *But how could it survive in the Oasis without bursting into flames? And why are they still after me as the guy on the phone said everything would be okay if I just stopped snooping around? Unless … someone saw me talking to Derek and they know that Derek is somehow involved!*

Then it struck him. “Where’s my brother?” he blurted.

The operator turned and motioned to the house with his hand.

“No!” Dillon yelled as he ran to the front door.

He was about to go in again when he heard a loud call from the side.

“Where you going twerp?” came Jordan’s cry.

Dillon looked over to see Jordan walking toward them from the slide area. His heart leaped when he saw his brother unharmed. He ran over and was about to give him a hug but Jordan quickly shot his hand out and smacked him in the chest. “Whoa!” Jordan said. “It wasn’t *that* scary. At least not for me. Keep your distance little bro.”

Dillon quickly collected himself. “Sorry. I … um … thought you were going to need some comforting and a new pair of pants after that ride,” Dillon said, trying to be cool.

“Sure …” Jordan replied with a smirk. “Let’s go find some other stuff to do. “Thanks for the fright, creepy haunted house dude,” he waved to the operator. The operator waved back as he watched the two brothers slip into the crowd once more.

16

MORE QUESTIONS, FEW ANSWERS

Dillon's heart wasn't into any more rides after the haunted house. Jordan tried to coax him into it but to no avail. Finally he just dismissed his little brother and went on whatever rides he wanted. Dillon waited dutifully at each one, constantly watching his back and jumping around at every little sudden sound that was around him. When Jordan got off the ride Dillon would try and act as cool as he could, dismissing his disinterest with not feeling very well.

Eventually Jordan played himself out and headed for the rendezvous point where they were supposed to meet Mom, Dad, and the girls. As it would happen it was just about that time anyway.

As Dillon walked through the park he kept looking over his shoulder; his imagination kept running off, picturing a multitude of ways he was about to die. None happened.

Mom, Dad, and the girls seemed excited about everything they saw at the park. Gwen wouldn't stop talking! It was alright with Dillon though, as it kept any attention away from himself so he wouldn't have to fake being as excited as everyone else. At this point he just wanted to get back to the resort and call it a night. The thing that really troubled him was the fact that the rat creature was able to somehow survive on the resort property without exploding into a ball of flames like the coyote did. The only way he could reason this out was that maybe it had something to do with actually touching land? And if it did have to

do with touching land, who brought it there? And how closely was he being watched that they anticipated him being in the haunted house or were able to get in and release the rat? It seemed as sound an explanation as any, but without really knowing the details of what those creatures were, and who it was that was behind this, he was really just speculating.

As soon as the Hunts made it back to the resort Dillon hurried to the elevator without saying a word.

“You okay Dillon,” Dad hollered after him.

“Ya. I just really have to go to the washroom,” he yelled back without even turning his head.

“Okay, but don’t forget to meet us down here for dinner in an hour,” his Mom called after him.

“Sure thing,” he said with a wave as he disappeared around the corner.

Dad looked to Jordan.

“Well, if you gotta go, you gotta go,” Jordan said with a laugh.

He was thinking about making some excuse as to why he couldn’t go, but then he thought that it actually might be better for him to be out in a public place where there were people around. After the coyote incident he was determined to do just that, but the rat caused him to vacillate back and forth from wanting to be shut in, to thinking it was wiser to be around people. Every encounter he had to this point happened when there was no one around to witness it which made him believe that the people behind this were trying to be as evasive as possible. So, in this moment, he decided that he should be around as many people as he could be.

After the Hunts got settled in for dinner Dad opened the conversation. “So, what did you guys like best about today?” he asked.

Gwen went off again telling the family about everything she saw and did. The others let her go for a bit then Claire cut her short. “That’s enough Gwen,” she stated in an exasperated tone. “You’ve already told us everything twice!”

Gwen stopped talking but put on her pouty look. “Fine!” she stated as she crossed her arms.

“What about you boys?” asked Mom. “What was the most exciting thing you did at the park?”

Jordan smirked at Dillon. “I would have to say that it was the haunted house.”

“Wow! A haunted house?” Dad asked enthusiastically.

“Ya. It was pretty awesome, though I think Dillon would have preferred the kids carousel,” he said with a laugh.

Dillon scowled at him. *If only he knew*, he thought to himself.

“You see, we had to go in one at a time and Dillboy here went first. It must have scared him so bad that when I was done he came running over to give me a hug and make sure I was okay!” Jordan couldn’t help but laugh when he recounted the incident.

“I was not scared!” Dillon blurted. “I just didn’t think that someone as big and dumb as you would be able to make it without crapping yourself!”

Jordan slapped Dillon on the head.

“Boys!” Mom yelled.

They both glared at each other before going back to their appetizers and drinks.

After dinner the Hunts decided to hang out at the pool for a couple hours before turning in. They all went to their rooms and got changed in their swim gear and grabbed their towels.

“See ya down at the pool Dillboy!” Jordan said—seemingly happy with the new nickname he had come up with for his brother—as he headed out the door of their room.

Dillon finished getting changed, grabbed his towel, and headed to the pool. As he was walking through the lobby by the front desk he heard someone call him over. He jumped a little at the sound of his name but soon collected himself as he noticed that it was Janeen.

Dillon promptly jogged over to the desk. “What is it Janeen? Did you find out what that symbol means?” he asked in a hushed tone, not sure who might be

listening in.

Janeen looked at him curiously. “Why are you whispering?” she asked.

“Oh … uh … it’s just a habit I get into sometimes when I talk about stuff that’s … ah … interesting and mysterious,” he lied.

“Oh, okay,” she responded in a hushed tone. “Well, I found out that no one really knows what this symbol means,” she said. “It was really weird actually when I was asking around because you would think that someone knows what it means, or even where it came from. Most people didn’t even notice it on the wall. I finally had to ask a friend of mine who I met when I first started here. He’s an older guy who has been around for a while and I thought for sure he would know something, but he didn’t.”

“Oh …” Dillon replied dejectedly. “That’s kind of a bummer.”

“Ya, tell me about it. He seemed really curious too about why I was asking.”

Dillon’s heart skipped a beat when he heard that. “And what did you say?” he prodded.

“I told him that you were asking about it,” she said matter-of-factly.

Dillon froze, his thoughts spinning.

“I figured he would be interested in one of his guests being so observant as we have never had that question before,” Janeen confessed innocently.

“His guests?” Dillon asked.

“Oh yeah,” Janeen responded with a wave. “He’s one of the board members who has oversight of the resort. He’s a nice old man who loves to make sure that his guests have a great time!”

Thanks! Dillon thought to himself as he started to wonder if the reason he seemed to have a target on himself was somehow due to the fact that others now knew he was asking questions.

“Oh … okay thanks Janeen,” Dillon said, trying to be as upbeat as possible.

“No problem!” she responded with a big smile.

Dillon walked away in a daze, not sure what to think. Did this conspiracy go right to the top? How else would someone know that he was snooping around? It just didn’t add up though that someone would risk exposure if something bad happened to a twelve year old kid at their resort. Dillon knew that he may have

gotten in over his head, but in reality, it wasn't his fault. It was Derek's and those people he works for. Dillon and his family wouldn't even be here if it weren't for them orchestrating the circumstances behind them coming to the resort. Dillon decided that Derek would have to answer a lot of questions when he made contact with him next time.

After about an hour of hanging out by the pool Dillon started to relax more. He even went and played an epic game of pool dodge ball with Gwen and some other kids within his age range that he met poolside. He figured that no one would be stupid enough to try and attack him right in the middle of the resort with all the people around. That thought made him feel safe.

The rest of his family seemed to be enjoying themselves too. As Dillon played, the recent memories of his ordeals would surface for a moment, but then he would repress them and carry on with the fun he was having. Despite all of his thrill and desire for excitement and adventure, he was beginning to just enjoy being a kid on vacation with his family.

He quickly jumped out of the pool for a moment, wiped himself with his towel, and grabbed his virgin margarita. He sucked back on the straw like his life depended on it.

"Come on Dillon!" he heard Devon, a kid who was about his own age, call from the pool.

Dillon put his hand up indicating that he would just be a moment. He slammed the margarita cup down and was about to head back into the water when he heard someone behind him say, "Mr. Dillon Hunt. You have a message at the front desk for you."

Dillon turned to see one of the bellman standing there.

"Who could that be from?" Dillon's Mom asked as she looked up from her book.

"Who knows?" Dillon responded, trying to play it cool. He actually didn't know who it was from, and even feared he was going to get another call from the deepen-voiced man. "Oh … it's probably from Sarah," he said, trying to make up something on the fly. "She's probably just wondering how I'm doing and didn't want to use up any minutes on my cell."

“Well that’s courteous of her,” Mom said as she returned to her book. “I’ve always liked that girl.”

Dillon rolled his eyes and headed for the lobby. *It’s a good thing Dad wasn’t around to hear that*,” Dillon thought to himself. *He would have been a little more suspicious*.

As he approached the front desk and mentioned who he was, the guy there handed him a note and said, “The man who left this was insistent that I give it to you in person at the desk.”

“Oh … okay,” replied Dillon as he took the note, feeling a little overwhelmed with the apparent seriousness of the message.

He opened up the folded paper and all that was written on it was a phone number.

He looked back to the guest services agent who was already busying himself at the computer. “What did the guy look like?” he asked.

The man thought for a moment. “The only thing I really recall was that he was, caucasian, muscular, and bald with an odd tattoo on his head.

He immediately felt a sigh of relief inside of himself as he realized that it was Derek. He rushed over to the business center, sat himself down in one of the cubicles, and was about to pick up the phone when a thought struck him. He immediately put the phone down. If the conspirators were the ones who were running the resort then of course they would probably have the phones tapped. He realized that he would need to use his cell which was in his room.

Dillon ran over to where his stuff was poolside and grabbed his card-key.

“What’s up?” asked Mom as she looked up from her book again.

“Oh nothing,” replied Dillon. “I just remembered that I forgot something in my room.” He darted away from her as quickly as possible, not giving her a chance to ask anymore questions.

He ran across the lobby as quickly as he could and into the closest available elevator. Even though his room was only a few floors up it felt as if the elevator ride would last for an eternity! Finally the doors opened and he darted down the hall toward his room. As he got his card out he noticed that something wasn’t right: his door was already unlocked and cracked open with the upper secondary

door lock from the inside opened and resting on the frame!

Dillon froze. His heart pounded. His thoughts whirled, trying to remember if he was the one who left his door opened by accident when he exited. No. He remembered closing it tightly before heading to the pool and he didn't think Jordan had come up yet. Someone else must have opened it after and, either didn't close it when they left, or were still in there!

Despite his better judgement, Dillon took a couple deep breaths then, with one hand, opened the door slowly. He took a step inside and listened for a moment. He heard nothing except for the low buzz of the air conditioning unit. He felt the chill of the cool air on his damp shorts. "Hello!" he called out. "Is someone there?" No response.

"Hello!" he called out again. "I'm packing heat!" he warned. "I don't want any trouble."

He wasn't sure if that was water from the pool or sweat which was dripping down his forehead. He took another step inside and peeked around the first corner that led to the bathroom. It was dark. He paused and listened but heard nothing. He approached the bathroom, reached for the light, flicked it on quickly, and jumped inside.

He shrieked and fell backward as he saw someone staring at him! His heart pounded faster as he fell back into the tub taking the shower curtain with him. He grunted and shrieked, trying to get the curtain off of him, thinking that he was about to be leaped upon and throttled at any moment. He was finally able to rip the curtain off and pulled himself from the tub. It was only then that he realized that the person he saw was himself in the mirror! He chuckled. Then he became serious once more, realizing that he could still be in danger.

By this time he knew that, if there was someone in the room, then they either fled when he was wrestling with himself in the tub, or they were around the corner, ready to confront him. At this point he was starting not to care. He marched around the corner and turned on the light. No one was there. He looked around to see if anything was out of place, but everything seemed normal at first glance.

He went to his side table and grabbed his phone. As he did, he noticed that

his back pack wasn't where it should have been. It was on the end of the bed instead of in the corner with his suitcase where he left it, and the top zipper was cracked open. He knew at this point that someone was looking through his stuff. Then it hit him! He leaped over the bed and reached underneath it to where the slight rip in the boxspring was. He felt around for a moment and then breathed a sigh of relief when he felt that the watch and arrow head were right where he had hid them.

He unlocked his phone and dialled the number on the paper.

"What took you so long Dillon?" Derek asked when he answered.

"Sorry, I wanted to make sure no one else was listening in so I went to my room to use my cell."

"Good work Dillon," Derek replied. "That shows a level of maturity beyond your years."

"Thanks. But listen Derek. Someone knows I'm involved. I didn't have time to tell you when we spoke the other day but they tried to kill me at the information center after you talked to Tom Tom. I was there, and when you left, I was attacked by some … creatures," Dillon explained. "Tom Tom is gone!" His voice cracked as he choked up.

There was a short pause on Derek's end. "I know," Derek admitted. "I saw those creatures take off after you when I was just leaving the center. All I could do was let a few shots go in order to buy you some time and hoped that you would make it to the Oasis before they caught you. And you did."

"Did you know that the creatures can't come onto the Oasis property without burning up?" Dillon asked.

"We weren't sure. Actually, we weren't even really sure that the creatures existed until I saw them chasing you that day. It was only a theory up to then."

"Do you guys have any idea what they are or where they came from?" Dillon asked in desperation, trying to get some answers.

"We don't know. Something bad is going on here and those who try to uncover it tend to go missing," replied Derek. "That's why we need to take these people down as soon as we can. Unfortunately, they are really cunning in preventing us from going after them. We suspect they are getting some outside

help, but don't know who that is. Are you still up for helping us?" Derek asked.

Now Dillon was the one who paused. He knew that he was already in over his head and that his family were supposed to be here for another week and a half, which is a long time to be constantly looking over your shoulder for the next attack.

"I'm in," he heard himself say. He almost couldn't believe that he was signing up for something that could potentially kill him. But what choice did he have? None. And he knew it.

"But I have to be honest with you Derek," he continued, "I'm getting scared as someone tried to take me out in the haunted house at the amusement park with another creature, and I know my room was searched. I suspect they were looking for the watch and arrow head."

"Did they find it?" Derek blurted.

"No. Thankfully I hid them after I got back from the amusement park," he said. He could hear Derek relax a little on the other end.

"Okay good," Derek replied. "See, you are getting good at this."

"Getting good at this?" Dillon asked exasperatedly. "I don't even know what *this* is!"

"It's okay Dillon," Derek reassured. "I'll be there with you through the rest of this. The next thing we need to do is that you have to get to town tomorrow morning by 10:00. Meet me at 1587 Palm Tree Crescent, which was John's place while he was here. And don't forget to bring the watch and arrowhead."

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"You're a smart kid," Derek replied. "I know you'll figure it out. And don't worry about anyone getting into your room tonight. My friends and I will make sure that you have a good night sleep. Remember: John is counting on you. That is, if he's still alive."

"Wait what?" Dillon said, but there was no reply. Derek had hung up already.

"Great!" Dillon said as he hung up the phone, his thoughts astir. "Just get to town, Dillon. You'll figure it out, Dillon. Help us save John, Dillon!" he said sarcastically. "Does anyone realize that I'm only twelve!"

17

JOHN'S HOUSE

Dillon headed back to the pool after he got off the phone with Derek. As he went he was racking his brain as to how he was going to convince Mom and Dad to let him go to town. Sure, he had gone to the information center the other day by himself, but his parents didn't know that as they thought he was hanging out at the pool with Jordan. On that occasion he also knew that they were going to be gone longer than he was, so it was easy for him to just go. This was different. As far as he knew, his parents were planning on staying around the resort and just chilling. He figured the chances of him slipping away without them noticing was pretty well nil.

He also didn't want his parents tagging along as he needed to make sure that he was able to get away and head to 1587 Palm Tree Crescent to meet up with Derek. He knew he should be leery about going along with a stranger. His parents always spoke to the kids about the danger they could get into if they were too trusting of strangers, but he just had a feeling he could trust Derek. Besides, with all the weird stuff that had happened to him up to this point, and his life being in jeopardy, he had no reason to believe that Derek wasn't telling the truth about Orion. In reality, he had no choice but to trust Derek.

As he approached he decided that the direct approach would probably be the best.

"Hey Mom, Dad," Dillon said as he walked up. "I don't suppose I would be able to take the bus to town tomorrow? There's a couple of things I would like to

check out."

"I don't know man," replied Dad. "I was looking forward to just hanging out here tomorrow."

"You don't have to come," Dillon was quick to respond. "I can take it by myself. I have a phone just in case I need to get a hold of you guys."

"Sorry, but I'm not comfortable with you going by yourself," said Dad.

"Don't look at me little bro," Jordan added as he closed his eyes while reclining back in his deck chair.

"What about Claire?" asked Dillon desperately.

Claire, who was sitting next to Jordan scoffed.

Dillon could feel his chances of getting to town slip through his grasp. "Are you sure you don't want to come Claire?" Dillon asked, a plan starting to hatch in his mind.

"I'm not really up for it Dillon," she said.

"But I'm sure I saw a *Jeff's* brand-name shirt store," he said, stressing the "*Jeff*" part of the name. "Or maybe it was *Jeff's* new and used emporium. I can't quite remember. No. I know, it was *Jeff's* Tall Dark Clothing Outlet."

Claire almost fell over! Dillon knew that Claire had now realized that he knew about her boyfriend at home, Jeff Stalman. Mom and Dad specifically told all the kids that they were not to date until they were at least sixteen, but when Claire met Jeff Dillon figured she threw that mandate out faster than a ninety five mile an hour fast ball! And now he was using that fact against her! Dillon would pull that card if he needed to.

"Okay, okay," she blurted. "I would love to take you," she said with gritted teeth.

"Great!" Dillon beamed. "We need to leave at nine. Is that okay with you guys," he said as he turned back to Mom and Dad.

They both looked at each other for a moment then nodded their approval.

Claire glared at him.

Dillon stretched and yawned. "Man it's getting late. I'm going to turn in for the night. See you in the morning Claire," he said as he collected the rest of his things and headed for the Lobby. "You might want to consider going to bed too.

We have an early day tomorrow," he smiled at her.

If her eyes were daggers then Dillon would have died a thousand times over.

DILLON LOOKED AROUND THE LOBBY TRYING TO APPEAR CASUAL AS HE WAITED for Claire to show up. It was only five minutes past nine which was not unusual for his sister, especially due to the fact that she was probably still angry at him for coercing her into helping him get to town. Knowing her, she would probably stretch it out to the last minute. Dillon wasn't too worried yet as the first shuttle bus didn't leave for town until about twenty passed nine. He still had time.

As Dillon waited, his thoughts kept going to the meaning of the symbol on the wall. Perhaps maybe the only person who might be able to help him with this knowledge was Tom Tom, and Dillon didn't even know if he was still alive. He thought about asking another tribe member—maybe the woman from the bike shop—but he really didn't know who he could trust and didn't want to risk it.

A moment later Claire surprised him by shambling out of the elevator and into the lobby. She had a whole eight minutes to spare! This was uncharacteristically like her. As she approached Dillon he could tell that she was still mad at the way he was able to get her to "volunteer" to go with him into town.

"Good morning Claire," Dillon said in an innocent tone, trying to appear as meek as possible.

"Morning," she grunted. The look on her face further confirmed that she wasn't just mad, but potentially infuriated with her little brother.

Dillon didn't know what to say as they both walked outside to the front of the resort in order to wait for the shuttle. The silence was deafening!

They got to the bus stop and stood there, neither saying a word. Dillon looked around, pretending to be interested in some birds that perched on a pole nearby. Claire looked down at her phone, tapping away at one of her games. Dillon cleared his throat a couple of times seeing if she would look up from her game. No response. The tension was so thick that you could cut it with a knife!

After a moment Claire finally turned to Dillon and spouted angrily, “How do you know about Jeff?”

Dillon wasn’t really surprised by the question as Claire had gone to great lengths to keep her taboo relationship a secret. “I overheard you talking to one of your friends about it when I was passing by your room,” he responded. “I also saw you and Jeff hanging out in the park after school a few times on my walk home.”

“Ya but that doesn’t mean anything,” Claire snapped. “Lot’s of girls and guys hang out!”

“Yes but normally the guys don’t give the girls a flower like I witnessed just before spring break of last year,” Dillon said with a wry smile. “Not to mention the notes you have neatly tucked into your binder, or the kiss you gave him after school. Do you want me to continue?”

Claire fumed! “How do you know about the notes?” she demanded.

“One of them fell out of your binder once and I found it.” He paused. “And it was a good thing that I found it and not Mom and Dad,” he asserted. “Anyway, I didn’t know what it was until I opened it and found that Jeff was swearing his undying love to you.”

Claire’s face went beet red at that last remark.

“So after discovering what it was I thought that the decent thing to do would be to put it back when you weren’t looking and pretend that nothing ever happened.”

She relaxed a little at Dillon’s display of discretion.

“Come on Claire,” Dillon continued. “I didn’t want you to get in trouble. That’s why I didn’t say anything before.”

“But what about now?” Claire asked, her anger starting to rise again with the thought of Dillon’s play on her that got her stuck going with him to town.

“Sorry about that,” Dillon replied. “But I really need to get to town and I knew that Mom and Dad wouldn’t let me go without someone else coming—someone older—and you seemed like the best choice.”

“Why do you need to go there so badly?” asked his sister, her curiosity starting to peak.

“Oh … it’s nothing important,” Dillon replied, trying hard to think of a good reason that would allow them to split up. “It’s just some boring stuff that I read in one of my books that I want to check out.” He pulled his backpack up onto his shoulder a little more as he saw the shuttle bus approaching the stop. “How about you head to the mall and I’ll meet you there after?”

“Oh no. You conned me into going with you to keep an eye on you and that’s just what I’m going to do! Mom and Dad expect us to stay together, remember?” Claire replied angrily.

Dillon took a step back. “You won’t have fun where I’m going,” he shot back.

“Does it matter? I didn’t even want to come in the first place!”

Dillon was dumbfounded. He didn’t see this coming. And he knew he couldn’t take Claire with him. He needed to think of something fast.

“Wouldn’t you have more fun at the mall?”

“Maybe. But it wouldn’t be as much fun as making your life miserable for a couple of hours,” she replied with a wicked grin.

“Fine. How about I give you my weeks worth of allowance?”

Claire stared at him. “And … you … can use ten of my minutes to call Jeff when we get back,” he said desperately.

Claire was silent. “Okay. That sounds reasonable,” she smiled as the bus pulled up.

Dillon shook his head in disbelief as he walked onto the bus behind his sister. He was thankful that it wasn’t Jordan he had to bribe as he was sure his brother would have been a little more suspicious about why he wanted to be alone. Fortunately, Claire wasn’t as deep of a thinker as he was.

DILLON, USING THE MAPS APP ON HIS PHONE, HAD NO PROBLEM FINDING 1587 Palm Tree Crescent. It was about a fifteen minute walk from where the bus had dropped him and Claire off, and he planned it just about right with the pick up and drop off schedule for the bus when he looked at it the night before. In reality,

the residential area of the Oasis Resort wasn't really that big. It was mainly reserved for members of the tribe with a few really nice condos and houses for people like Janeen and that Aussie bellman from the hotel who came there to work.

The most striking thing about the residential area was how clean it was! All the lawns were cut neatly, the hedges trimmed, and the flowers that grew there looked well taken care of. It didn't look as though there was even any wear-and-tear on the streets, sidewalks, fences, or signs! Dillon thought that it seemed kind of creepy. The only thing that made it halfway normal was the fact that there were kids out playing, moms strolling along the sidewalks with their baby strollers and little ones in tow, and a few others out walking their dogs. That kind of activity put Dillon at ease as it reminded him of the street that he lived on back home.

"In one hundred feet take the next right onto Palm Tree Crescent," said the melodic woman's voice of the GPS, which brought Dillon's thoughts back to why he had come all this way. He immediately stopped gazing around and focused his attention to where he was going.

When he made it to Palm Tree Crescent the GPS sounded again. "Turn right onto Palm Tree Crescent," she said. "Your destination is fifty feet on your left."

Dillon double tapped his phone and swiped up to get rid of the mapping.

As he approached the house he noticed a man sitting in a car across from the address. He immediately recognized it as Derek. Derek, as soon as he saw the boy, got out of the car and came over to him. He smiled and nodded as he did. "Good to see you could make it. I knew you wouldn't disappoint."

"Look, I can help, but I've got to leave here by 10:45 at the latest. The next bus comes at 11:15 and I promised my parents we'd be back on that bus."

Derek laughed and put his hands up, motioning for Dillon to slow down. "Don't worry kid, we'll be out of here in no time."

Dillon breathed easier and nodded. "So, this is the place," he said, trying to contain his nervousness which he knew he was doing a terrible job at.

"Yep. The last residence of John Taylor Sebastian," Derek replied soberly. He then looked to Dillon again. "You did bring the watch and arrow head, didn't

you?”

“Of course I did,” Dillon said, reaching into his pocket. He was about to pull them out, but Derek stopped him.

“Not here,” he whispered. “Let’s wait till we’re inside.

Dillon nodded and zipped the bag back up.

They both approached the front door. “Does someone else live here now?” asked Dillon.

“Actually someone does. But the friends I work with have made sure that they won’t be back for at least two hours.”

The way Derek talked about *his friends* sent a chill down Dillon’s back. He wasn’t sure why as Derek didn’t say it in a cryptic manner or by using a Batman voice, but the mention of others from a secret organization that he didn’t really know anything about was kind of creepy. Dillon shook the thoughts away as he knew that the questions he had for Derek about the people he worked for would have to wait for another time.

Derek turned the door handle, but the door appeared to be locked. He then reached in his pocket and produced a small square black device. He pushed a button on the device and a small flat rod snapped out of the end of it. Derek forced the rod into the door lock, jiggled it around a little, and then pushed another button. Dillon heard the distinctive sound of the locking mechanism moving and then the “click” as it finished its revolution. Derek looked down at Dillon and smiled. “Standard issue,” he said with a light chuckle as he opened the door.

Now Dillon really did want to meet the people that Derek worked for if only to get his hands on one of those awesome devices!

Derek entered the hallway and motioned for Dillon to do the same. When they were both in the house Derek shut and locked the door again. He turned to Dillon. “Okay, now you can pull out the watch and the arrow head.”

Dillon took the two items out. “I’m not sure what you want me to do with these,” he said.

“I don’t know either,” replied Derek. “But those items were mailed directly to us by John just before he went missing so I have to assume they are incredibly

important in finding out what happened to him. I'm trusting you to be able to figure out what they're for."

Dillon swallowed hard as he began to feel the gravity of the situation come down on him. "Okay," he said at length, "but you need to give me a moment to think about this."

"Sure. No problem. But let's think about it somewhere else in this house."

"Okay. Where?" asked Dillon.

"I'm thinking we start in the room he used as a study while he was here," Derek replied.

"Okay. Where is that?"

"Follow me," said Derek as he started to move through the house.

The two trespassers went down the hallway, through another room, and to a set of stairs. Derek took them up the stairs and to the room that was directly across at the top. Dillon was amazed at how large this house seemed. It didn't look nearly this big from the outside.

The room they entered appeared to be a kid's room now. It had a single bed, a small dresser that was decorated like Lightning McQueen, and tons of toys scattered throughout.

"This was his study?" Dillon asked, not even trying slightly to hide his sarcastic tone.

Derek nodded as he began to move around the room as though he was trying to remember the layout from when John was the renter.

"Were you in this room before?" asked Dillon as he noted Derek's movements.

"Not exactly," he replied, still moving around as though he was picturing a desk here, and some chairs there. "I Skyped with him a number of times while he was performing his work here," he said, glancing back at Dillon who was now looking more intensely at the watch.

Dillon opened up the watch and looked to where the hands should have been. It was weird that the hands were missing. He just assumed that it was incredibly old and they got damaged somehow and were beyond repair.

"Did this thing work when you had it?" Dillon asked. "I mean, do you know

what happened to the hands?”

“No,” replied Derek with a curious tone to his voice. “I always just assumed that it got damaged before it got to us.”

Dillon looked more closely, then grabbed his pocket knife out, flipped it open, and started trying to pry the glass off. Surprisingly it came up without much effort.

“That was way too easy,” Dillon said as he looked to Derek.

“Well we know it was opened at least once when the hands were taken out,” Derek postulated, coming closer to see Dillon at work with the watch. “But why would John do that?”

“I don’t know. Unless … ” Dillon took the arrowhead he had found and started examining it. “Here! Look,” he said excitedly to Derek as he pointed to something on one side of it.

“It looks like a small hole,” Derek said, not quite catching on.

Dillon nodded as he took the arrowhead and placed it into the watch where the hands were supposed to go. It fit perfectly! As soon as he connected the arrowhead with the watch pin it started to spin. Dillon began moving around the room holding out the watch and seeing what the arrowhead would do. It spun around a little and then started to aim to the right. He walked that way, then it started to aim to the left a little. Every time Dillon moved the way the watch was pointing it would readjust a little until it finally stayed pointing at the wall where the kid’s dresser was.

Derek quickly moved the dresser out of the way. There didn’t seem to be anything out of the ordinary with this part of the wall, but the arrowhead was definitely pointing at it, and Dillon figured there had to be a reason. He moved closer to the wall and inspected it. Everything seemed to be normal. He ran his hand along it and didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary.

“I don’t know what to make of it,” he said, seeming a little confused. “Maybe we just need to cut into it to see what’s there.”

Derek didn’t like that prospect. “I don’t think we can do that,” he told Dillon seriously. “Keep looking and I’ll search around the rest of the room to see if there is anything else that can help us out.”

“Did anyone else from Orion come here before us and search for any clues that John might have left behind?” Dillon asked before he started poking around.

“Yes. That’s the disturbing part,” Derek replied. “We had some of our best people with their high-tech equipment come in here and they found nothing. Some of them suspected that there was a dampening field around the resort as our surveillance equipment couldn’t see anything from either the inside or outside. The only signal that seems to get in or out are cell signals. That’s probably because they’re trying to maintain a low profile. Not having cell service might elicit too many complaints. The happier they keep their guests, the more business they do, which means more profits.”

“What about the more non-subtle tactic of taking walls apart?” Dillon asked.

Derek shook his head. “No. We prefer to stay as covert as possible. That would have just drawn too much attention. We have to resort to stealth until we can find out who, or what, we’re dealing with here.”

Derek paused for a moment as if trying to choose his words wisely. “Orion doesn’t like attracting any attention to itself if possible. It’s kind of a mandate that’s been laid out.”

Dillon nodded, trying to take it all in, then looked back to the wall. As he did, he noticed, what looked to be three small dots on the wall. For some reason he didn’t notice them when he first looked, but now they were here, plain as could be. Immediately his mind whirled back to when he first found the arrowhead. The pattern of the dots seemed familiar. He took the arrowhead off the watch pin and looked at the bumps he had seen before. They appeared as though they would be a perfect match. He took the arrowhead and put the pins into the holes. There was a click.

Derek heard the click a few feet away and rushed over to see what Dillon had found. As he came over he saw Dillon push on the wall. A section about one foot by one foot depressed into the wall and hinged to the left. It was a cleverly designed door as the seams were so well hidden that you couldn’t even tell there was a door there.

“Remind me to ask John, when we find him, how he was able to make such an ingenious hiding space,” Derek said.

The mention of finding John alive gave Dillon hope. It was nice for him to hear that Derek was optimistic about that prospect. The thought of this also gave Dillon a longing that Tom Tom might still be alive as well. This brought a seriousness to him that he rarely experienced. He knew he had to do what he could to help these men, and for some reason Derek believed that he was the one to be able to help do just that. Dillon, on the other hand, had huge doubts about this.

“Well … go on,” Derek prodded when he saw that Dillon had paused after opening the door.

Dillon bent down and looked inside the hole. The only thing he saw was a medium sized black backpack. He reached inside, grabbed hold of one of the straps, and was about to pull it out when Derek suddenly cocked his head toward the door.

“What?” asked Dillon with a tone of urgency in his voice.

Derek turned back to Dillon. “We’re not alone,” he whispered as a he pulled out his gun.

“What! You mean you didn’t have anyone on the outside as a lookout?” Dillon spouted.

“We’re a little short staffed right now,” Derek replied in a loud whisper as he cocked his gun.

18

THE MERCENARY

"What's that?" Dillon asked, as loud as he dared, pointing at Derek's gun.

"Duh … It's a gun," came Derek's sarcastic reply.

"I know it's a gun!" replied Dillon. "But what's it for?"

Derek glanced at him with that, *"Really kid?"* expression.

"Okay I know what it's for!" Dillon whispered a little louder as he rose to stand beside Derek. "But is it really necessary?"

"I don't know," came Derek's sharp reply. "But I'd rather have it and not need it then not have it and need it!"

"What if it's just the owners of the house?"

"That's doubtful. I know for a fact that the owners are still detained," Derek whispered matter-of-factly.

They could hear some light movement coming up the stairs.

"Well I really don't want to see anyone get shot today! Especially not me!" Dillon whispered emphatically.

"Okay … okay … " Derek said as he placed his gun back in its concealed spot under his shirt. He then bent down and reached under his pant leg and produced a small combat knife.

"What's that?" Dillon asked again.

Derek just shook his head at him. "Listen Dillon, I'm not going into a possible fight without some protection. I'll try not to kill anyone, okay."

Dillon nodded his head up and down so fast that he looked like one of those bobble heads people have on their dashboards.

“Quick! We only have a second,” Derek said as he darted to the side of the door.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Just stay there,” Derek replied.

“What? And be used as bait?”

Derek shrugged his shoulders.

“And what if he has a gun and shoots at me before you have a chance to take him down?”

“Then run and try not to get shot!” Derek’s reply was less than comforting.

“I’m only twelve remember! I’m too young to die!”

Derek put a finger to his mouth, telling Dillon to be quiet.

Dillon could feel his heart pound in his chest. He was sure that it was going to explode at any moment. It sounded as though the person who was coming up the stairs was trying to be as quiet as they could but were failing due to the aged stair boards that creaked ever so slightly with any amount of pressure. Eventually Dillon saw a tall figure emerge from the stairway. He was wearing a dark balaclava, had kaki shorts on and a Hawaiian short sleeved shirt. It looked ridiculous, but Dillon didn’t laugh as he noticed immediately that the man was carrying a gun.

Dillon made eye contact with him which was enough to trigger his fight or flight response. “Nope,” he said as he ran to the side and dived behind the bed.

He could hear the man move up the rest of the stairs quickly and head for the room. As soon as he entered the room Derek charged into him, sending the attacker flying into the wall. The man managed to stay on his feet. He spun to meet Derek, gun leading. Derek managed to sidestep and knock the gun out wide as a shot went off.

Dillon flinched when the shot fired. He saw the two men entangled, fighting for their lives.

Derek spun his knife around and sliced the attacker on the arm that held the gun. The attacker grunted in pain but stubbornly hung on to his weapon. He tried

to get another shot off, but Derek pushed his arm out wide again. The bullet sank into the wall beside Dillon's head.

Derek grabbed the gun arm with his empty hand and held it up high as the attacker struggled to get free. He sliced down on his arm again. This time the gun came loose and dropped to the ground as drops of blood poured down onto the floor. Derek was forced to let go at that point as the man punched him three times in the ribs. He quickly put some distance between him and the attacker as each sized the other up.

From behind his back the attacker pulled a knife about the same size as Derek's. Derek smiled. The man came forward. As fast as lightning Derek pulled his gun from behind his back and shot the attacker in the leg. The man went down in agony. As he crumpled, Derek gave him a clean roundhouse to the head which laid him out flat.

"See!" Derek exclaimed as he looked at Dillon who was now coming out from behind the bed. "Bang … down. That's how it works with guns!"

Dillon bobbed his head up and down quickly like the bobblehead dolls again.

"Now let's see who this guy is," said Derek as he crouched down and pulled the mask from his face. The man had a shock of thick wild blonde hair.

"I know this guy," Dillon said in surprise. "Well … I don't know him … I mean I've seen him around at the resort."

Derek looked at Dillon skeptically. "You've seen this guy?" he asked. "There's only roughly five thousand people at the resort, not including the resident population who come in from time to time to use the pool or have dinner in the restaurant, and you remember seeing this guy?"

"Hey man. You're the one who says I have gifts of observation. Besides, who could forget crazy hair like that!"

Derek conceded the point.

"And yes … I have seen this guy mingling around the pool when my family was there. Maybe he's the one who ransacked my room?"

"Could be," replied Derek. "But for now … " His voice trailed off as he pulled out his phone and took a picture of the guy. "Let's see if we know him."

Dillon watched as Derek's phone flipped through a bunch of pictures and

then stopped on this guy. “He is known by The Orion Group,” Derek stated. “He’s a hired gun. A mercenary.”

“A mercenary?” Dillon asked.

“Yes Dillon. A mercenary that is obviously after you. And …” Derek began to say but then trailed off as he read more of the data about this guy on his phone.

“And what?”

“Never mind it’s not important,” Derek replied as he put his phone away.

Dillon swallowed hard. “This guy must have known you were here with me,” Dillon finally said at length. “How else would he have known we were here except if he followed me? He would have then seen you and I entering together.”

“And your point is?” Derek asked.

“If he’s some expert then why did he barge in here like a deer in mating season and get caught off-guard?”

“Interesting analogy Dillon. Do you hunt much?”

“I saw a documentary one time,” he replied.

Derek rolled his eyes. “The one thing you have to learn from this is that not every ‘expert' is smart, or much of an expert,” Derek replied with a chuckle. “Besides, you made the difference by running and diving behind the bed at the right moment. Your sudden movement sparked the chase instinct in him which momentarily blocked his logic centers. At that moment, for a split second, all he wanted to do was to get you and dismissed any thought of me. That second was all I needed.”

“So what you’re saying is that my running away like a scared little rabbit saved the day?” Dillon sounded confused.

“Another documentary?” Derek asked dryly. “Now come on. Let’s finish up here with John’s stuff. I’ll text a friend of mine to come and clean this up,” Derek stated rather coldly.

“I thought you were short staffed?”

“Short staffed on field agents,” Derek explained. “Never mind,” he waved his hand dismissively.

Dillon swallowed hard. *What have I gotten myself into?* he thought to

himself. “Is this guy dead?” he asked.

“No. Just knocked out and bleeding a little. My friend will take him away and see to him.”

At this point Dillon thought that it was best not to ask anymore questions and instead he went back over to the hole in the wall and retrieved the backpack. Inside he found what appeared to be regular looking hiking gear: flashlight, lighter, large knife, hatchet, rope, and … a torch. Dillon thought that the torch was an odd addition to the gear, but then he remembered in his dream that he was carrying a torch. Even when he first dreamed about it he thought it was weird. Who uses torches in this day and age? But he just had this feeling that there was something important about it. The other weird thing he found was a large stone in the top pocket of the back pack. He looked at it closely as it appeared more metallic than stone. As he turned it over he got an idea. He pulled the hidden door shut by the arrowhead. As soon as it clicked shut the arrowhead came off the wall. Once the arrowhead was in Dillon’s hand he opened his palm and it immediately shot toward the stone and fastened itself there.

“Ah. A magnet,” Derek stated as he came closer, having finished bandaging the attackers leg and notifying his friend.

“A really powerful one,” Dillon commented. “John’s a pretty smart guy.”

Derek leaned in to take a picture of it with his phone when the display started to fade in and out, appearing as though it was shorting out. He pulled his phone away and it went back to normal, but he noticed that his battery was now down to thirty four percent.

“I think this stone has other properties,” Derek said, shaking his head in disgust. He turned the phone so Dillon could see the screen. “I just charged it this morning! Better keep your electronic devices clear.”

Dillon nodded, then rummaged through the pack a little more and in one of the side pockets he pulled out what appeared to be a map. He unfolded it and immediately recognized it as a map of the Oasis Resort and surrounding area. It went as far out as the information center. He noticed that there were large question marks in about six areas over places around the resort including the amusement park, Resort Hotel, various places in the residential area, and the

information center. All of the question marks had X's through them except the one at the Center.

"I think I know where the entrance is," Dillon said as he looked up at Derek and smiled.

"HEY SIS!" DILLON HOLLERED AS HE APPROACHED CLAIRE IN FRONT OF THE mall. Shortly after he and Derek left John's old house he called Claire and arranged a place to meet. Thankfully he kept his phone far enough away from the stone when they were at the house so that it didn't lose too much battery power.

"How was your sightseeing?" Claire asked, appearing to be bored by Dillon's pastimes.

"Oh … it was good. I got to see where the first houses were built, and the old library," he said trying to play it up. "Oh yeah! And they have this cool fire station!"

Claire rolled her eyes. "Lame," she said. "You're such a weird kid."

"Maybe, but sometimes weird is exciting," he said, wondering what she would have thought if she knew the truth about what he was doing.

"Sure thing. Whatever you say."

Dillon just smiled as they walked over to where the bus was going to pick them up again.

As they waited in silence he contemplated all the events that had happened that led up to this point. He also went over in his head the next stage of the plan. Derek felt that it was best if he took John's things in order to keep them safe. He did let Dillon keep the watch and arrowhead however. Dillon felt that maybe Derek figured he at least earned that.

The plan was for Dillon to sneak out of his room at one in the morning, meet Derek just outside the resort gate, and head to the information center. It sounded simple, but Dillon's stomach was in knots! He had almost been killed three times now, but hey, who's counting? He at least felt more comfortable that Derek was

with him in this. The guy obviously knew how to handle himself and that gave Dillon some measure of comfort. He also assured Dillon that he would make sure his room was watched so he didn't have any run-ins with more goons out to harm him. He also guaranteed that his family was safe. That was the biggest comfort of all for the young boy in the middle of this crazy ride.

He had mixed feelings about whether he was doing the right thing in helping out this Orion Group find John Taylor Sebastian. He wished he knew who they were. That thought nagged at him and made him feel uncomfortable. He was helping a mysterious organization who apparently operated from the shadows.

As he thought about it more he wondered, *Am I doing the right thing?*

19

ESCAPE FROM THE HOTEL

During dinner Claire tried not to make too much eye contact with Mom and Dad. She didn't want to be put into a difficult position about having to answer questions about her's and Dillon's trip to town.

"So how was town today?" Mom asked.

There it was! The bomb Claire was trying to avoid.

"Oh it was great!" Dillon jumped in. "We saw so many great sights and Claire was really good about it." Claire looked up at him and he smiled back at her as if to say, *"I've got this."* She thought for sure that he was going to blow it, as he was notoriously *not* good at keeping things from Mom and Dad.

"That sounds good," replied Dad. "What did you like the best?"

"I think the library was probably the best spot, but I'm sure Claire liked the mall when we got back and had lunch there."

Claire nodded. "Ya, the mall was definitely the best."

"Well I'm glad the two of you had such a good time," said Dad. "And thank you Claire for taking care of your brother. We appreciate you doing that for us, and I'm sure Dillon does too."

"Ya thanks sis!" Dillon said enthusiastically.

Claire gave Dillon that look that said, "*Don't overdue it*." In truth, it did appear to her that something was changing in her brother; she just couldn't put her finger on it.

Jordan stared hard at his brother and Claire for a moment then resumed his

eating. Claire couldn't help but feel that Jordan suspected that something was up with the two of them and hoped that he wouldn't say anything that would cause Mom and Dad to start "probing" into their time away. She was beginning to realize that Jordan wasn't always your typical shallow sixteen year old boy who raved about girls, gamed all the time, and was more concerned about how he looked then about anyone else.

AFTER DINNER DILLON WENT BACK INTO THE BUSINESS CENTER WITH HIS BOOKS. He was really nervous about the plan he and Derek made to go and find the entrance to the underground caverns of the Oasis and he wanted to do some more reading to make sure he was as prepared as possible. He cracked open the book Tom Tom had recommended to him about the creatures of the desert. After flipping through a couple pages he was struck with the creatures he was seeing in the book and the ones he had encountered so far in real life and in his dreams. He saw the coyotes, spiders, rats, and even snakes. The ones he had seen in person and in his dreams were obviously different as they had been changed somehow. He shuddered to think what other monsters they might be creating.

"Are you Dillon Hunt," came a deep smooth voice, which startled Dillon. He jumped a little as he looked up.

There, standing in front of him, was an elderly native man with long grey hair that was neatly tied back in a pony tale. He wore a collared shirt and a silk vest. The cologne he wore was warmly fragrant and smelled like a summer's breeze. He smiled warmly as he looked down at the boy.

"Ah … ya … that's me," Dillon replied, not really knowing what to say.

"Sorry to have startled you. But my name is Geoffrey Eagles-rock. I'm a friend of Janeen's."

Dillon was frozen. He didn't know what to say or do. Geoffrey didn't say a word, but let the awkward silence persist. Dillon had a feeling that he was enjoying watching the boy squirm.

"May I sit down?" he finally asked.

“Ah … sure,” Dillon responded.

Geoffrey pulled a chair over and sat down. “Janeen told me that you were wondering about the symbol we have carved on our wall at the front desk.”

Dillon didn’t say a word. The sound of his heart was deafening in his ears.

“You know Dillon, as I told Janeen, we don’t really know what that symbol means. But you know that’s not true don’t you?”

Dillon didn’t say a word.

“This isn’t a game,” Geoffrey warned. “You need to think about your family here.”

Dillon didn’t miss the threat.

“Besides,” Geoffrey continued, “how do you know that this Orion Group has your best interests in mind? You don’t even know anything about them.”

“Wait. How do you know about Orion?” Dillon blurted, not able to think about the implication of his admission of being in contact with Orion.

Geoffrey smiled. “We know more than you think we do,” he stated coldly. “If I were you I would consider not going any further with them. Orion will only bring you pain and suffering. And I can’t stand to see such young people suffer.”

Dillon thought about what Geoffrey was telling him, then built up the courage to ask, “What did you do with John and Tom Tom?”

Geoffrey was silent for a moment, then responded, “I really don’t know what you’re talking about. But if I were you, I would just enjoy the rest of my vacation and forget Orion. They aren’t what they seem.”

The aged man stood up and put the chair back where he got it from. “You’re so young and you have much to live for Dillon. Orion will take those years from you. That’s what they do. They use people and spit them out when they have no more need for them. Be careful. Despite what you might think, I’m on your side, and they aren’t.”

Dillon just sat there dumbfounded about what he was hearing. Was this man speaking the truth about Orion, or just trying to place doubts in his mind?

“Well, you have a good night Dillon. I hope you make the right choice,” Geoffrey said as he turned and walked from the room.

Dillon sat back, trying to digest what he just heard. Was Orion the bad guy

here? He truly didn't know, and that's what scared him the most.

DILLON LAID IN BED LOOKING AT THE WALL. DESPITE GEOFFREY'S WARNING HE had decided to trust that what he was doing with Derek was the right thing to do. It was a monumental struggle in his mind, but after replaying all the events that had led him to this point he knew that his best option was to see the mission through.

He had his back to his brother who was in the other bed beside his. By all accounts Jordan appeared to be fast asleep. Dillon rolled over slowly, trying not to make too much of a stir. He turned his head and saw that Jordan was laying on his side facing away from him. He looked at the clock on the stand next to his bed— it read 12:42 AM. He knew he had to go right away if he planned to make it to the rendezvous point with Derek on-time.

He pulled the covers off as slowly was he could, not wanting to cause more of a stir than was necessary. He was already fully dressed. Somehow he managed to climb into bed that night without Jordan realizing that he didn't change into his pyjama's. He was actually quite impressed with the feat as he really did put his pj's on at one point and made sure that Jordan saw him. Then, when Jordan went to use the restroom just before bed, Dillon quickly shed his pj's, jammed them under the bed, and put his clothes on again. He then climbed into bed before Jordan noticed and pretended to drop into a level four coma. It was ingenious! At least that's what he kept telling himself.

The fact that Jordan was in such a deep sleep already was amazing, as his brother was a bit of a night-owl. He originally thought this was going to be a problem, but tonight Jordan drifted off to sleep faster than normal. Perfect!

He was really happy at this point that he managed to get a couple hour nap in after dinner. He was still feeling the effects of sleep deprivation since being at the resort.

Dillon crept around his brother's bed and peeked at him for a moment, just to make sure he was out. All was good. Jordan was sleeping like a little baby.

Before he went for the door he checked his pockets to ensure that he had the watch and arrowhead. He then grabbed his shoes in one hand and slowly turned the lock with the other. At the end of the rotation the lock made a distinctive “click” sound and Dillon froze! He held his breath. His brother stirred for just a moment and then all was silent once more. Dillon let out his breath in a long slow silent sigh then started to turn the door handle.

Once outside he made absolutely sure that he closed the door as quietly as he could. He then slipped his shoes on and headed for the stairs. He was almost there when the door on the other side of the hallway right across from the stairs started to open. It was his parent’s room! Quickly he launched himself at the door to the stairway, hoping to make it before one of his parents came out and saw him. As he went through the door he glanced back to see his Dad looking down at his phone as he exited his room. It was at that point that Dillon was extremely happy about living in the age of technology! It just saved his butt!

The doorway to the stairs closed and he darted down as fast as he could go, not sure if Dad was going to be coming through the stairway as well. He went down one floor and stopped, trying to hear if the door he had just come through was opening. Nothing. He breathed another sigh of relief and continued down to the main floor.

When he got to the door he cracked it open and looked down each side of the hall. No one was there. He knew that the trick was going to be to make it through the lobby without being seen by any of the guest service agents. He was also hoping that no one was watching the cameras too closely so as to send out someone from security to nab him—whether or not they were just doing their job, or were actually part of the conspiracy to stop him and Orion. The fact that the mercenary from earlier didn’t report back into whoever it was that was behind all this would probably mean that the conspirator’s senses would be heightened. He had to trust that Derek and Orion were somehow working behind the scenes in order to execute on the plan.

He didn’t feel comfortable trying to find a side entrance at this point and silently berated himself for not doing any recon of the resort before he got to this point. This problem of the lobby wouldn’t be an issue if he had just been more

diligent in his planning.

The lobby was a concern because, at this point, he didn't know who he could trust. Obviously the head of the resort was in on it to some extent as was evidenced by his talk with Geoffrey.

He crept into the hall and toward the lobby. He peeked around the corner and didn't see anyone at all. He moved into the open space a little and tried to see if anyone was at the front desk. He saw someone there but they were heading away from him, going to the far side of the desk. He inched a little more into the lobby and then heard the distinctive ring of the elevator as it reached the main floor. His heart began to pound. He quickly ran across the main area and ducked behind the fountain before the door opened.

He heard someone come into the lobby from the elevator hallway and start talking to the guy manning the front desk. He knew from the voice that it was his Dad! He peeked around the fountain and saw him talking with the guest services agent.

What's Dad doing down here so late? Dillon thought to himself. He strained to hear the conversation but couldn't make out what they were talking about. Then he noticed that his Dad had his laptop with him and was showing it to the guest services guy. It looked like he was trying to deal with a technical issue or something.

Thankfully the conversation didn't take long and Dad seemed pleased with the answers he must have received from the man, as he shook his hand and headed back to the elevator. The agent started to walk to the end of the desk again and bent down, as if trying to retrieve something. Dillon knew that this was his only chance. He darted out from behind the fountain and sprinted as quietly as he could to the rotating front door of the hotel.

He burst through the door and onto the main strip that housed the resort and the numerous shops that catered to the tourists. Dillon hadn't been out this late at night before and was surprised to see that the shops were still open and people, mostly adults, mingled about taking in all the lights and attractions. He heard music coming from down the strip and saw some sort of electric light show happening. The restaurant that was across from the hotel turned into an energetic

dance club and now had a sign at the front door which read: “No Minors Allowed.”

Dillon had to shake his head a little in order to comprehend the scene. The transformation of the strip seemed surreal to him. It also made him wonder if Jordan had snuck out any of the previous nights to check out the attractions? This would totally have been his scene!

He couldn’t dwell on those thoughts anymore as he knew that time was quickly fading away. Despite all the foot traffic on the boulevard he still had a sense that he didn’t want to be seen by anyone or any camera if possible. He tried not to look too conspicuous as he walked across the street and then, when he thought no one was looking, he darted into the trees. He crept through the tall stalks staying in their shadows as he moved toward the front gate. It was good that the resort property didn’t have a wall around it, just the trees and other shrubs that added to the beauty of the place. It was also good that the front gate was a ways away from all the action.

As he approached the gate building he noticed a light on inside. Slowly he came to the side of the building right under the window. He carefully rose up and peeked inside. He scanned the area and didn’t see anyone. He was about to move on when he noticed a door on the inside swing open and he heard the sound of a toilet flush. The sudden movement of the door startled him and he ducked back down below the window. After a moment he dared to glance back over the windowsill again. Unfortunately the window was open and the smell of the restroom hit him. He silently gaged but managed to hold it in. Once the water from his eyes cleared he noticed a middle-aged man reclining easily in a large chair. He had a 42” screen TV mounted on the wall and was scrolling through the Netflix selections.

Dillon wasn’t sure how distracted the guard was but didn’t want to take any chances; he knew he couldn’t get caught. He looked around on the ground and found the largest stone he could. It was about the size of small apple. He peeked through the window once more and saw that the guard was still surfing for something to watch. He ducked back down and scooted around to the side of the guard house closest to the road. As he glanced around the corner he noticed that

the door was open. *Perfect!* he thought to himself. He lobbed the stone toward the entrance. It hit the ground with a crack and rolled into the night. Quickly, Dillon ducked back around the corner and peeked through the window again. The guard didn't show any signs that he noticed anything.

This guy must be deaf! he exclaimed to himself, as the night was incredibly quiet, and the TV wasn't playing anything yet.

As he was pondering his circumstance the guard suddenly got up. Dillon ducked beneath the windowsill again. He could hear the heavy footfalls of the man's boots on the wood floor. *Really! I can hear his boots and he couldn't hear that rock!* Dillon shouted in his head.

The footsteps were getting closer to the window. Dillon put his back against the wall as flat as he could, then started to move toward the corner of the building again as quietly as possible.

He looked both ways when he got to the road, and glanced back just to make sure the guard wasn't sticking his head out the open window. All was clear. He looked up to see where the cameras were mounted and figured that he might be able to stay in a blind spot if he stuck close to the wall.

He could feel his heart pound within his chest as he moved around the corner and toward the open door. As he got to the door he poked his head through the opening for a second and saw that the guard was still at the window, probably getting some fresh air. He knew he had to move. He sucked in his breath and darted across the doorway and around the corner of the building as quickly and quietly as he could. He didn't even stop to see if the guard had noticed anything as he ran into the darkness once more.

He moved up the road through the trees, trying to avoid all the street lights as he went. He must have gone about three hundred yards before he saw Derek's car parked off the side of the road and into the tree line a bit. As he approached he noticed that Derek was standing about ten feet in front of the car. He walked back and forth with his phone to his ear and waved his other hand around as he spoke to whoever it was. It almost looked like he was angry, or maybe frustrated about something.

Dillon went passed the car and approached Derek, not trying to be stealthy

anymore. Derek spun around quickly, grabbed his gun from behind his back and pointed it right at Dillon, all while still holding the phone to his ear.

Dillon jumped back and held his hands up reflexively. “Whoa!” he yelled. “It’s just me!”

Derek smiled and lowered the gun. “I have to go,” he said into the phone. Dillon could hear someone on the other end but couldn’t make out what they were saying. “I understand,” came Derek’s reply. “Don’t worry. We’ll make it happen. The boy’s here now. Bye.” He took the phone away from his ear and hung up from whoever it was.

“Who’s that?” Dillon asked.

“Just someone who’s interested in our success tonight,” Derek replied as he came closer to his young friend. “Did you bring the watch and arrowhead.”

Dillon nodded as he produced them from his pocket.

“Awesome. I have a feeling that those are going to come in handy tonight.”

“What about John’s field gear?” Dillon asked.

“It’s in the car.”

“Good, because I have a feeling that we’re going to need *that* bag tonight as well,” Dillon responded. He had already reasoned that John packed the gear for his excursion under the Oasis; an excursion that never took place.

“Come on,” Derek said. He motioned for Dillon to get in the car. “We should be going as we can’t waste any more time.”

“Before we do, you should know that earlier tonight a man name Geoffrey Eagles-rock paid me a visit tonight and tried to convince me that the Orion Group is not to be trusted. He said that you guys are using me, and that no good will come to me if I help you.”

“Then why did you come?” Derek asked.

“Because I have faith that you’re telling me the truth. Everything that’s happened to me up to this point is telling me that there’s something bad happening here and that you guys seem to be the only ones willing to do anything about it.”

“It sounds like this Geoffrey guy is scared of you Dillon.”

Dillon was taken back by that statement. “Scared of me? Why?”

“Because they see that you are a threat to them. And now that you’re working with us, it’s just a matter of time before we really find out what they’re up to.”

“But I’m only a twelve year old boy!” Dillon spouted. “How could I be scary to anyone?”

“Yes. A remarkable twelve year old,” Derek replied with a smile. “You might not think so now Dillon, but you’re destined for something greater.”

“How do you know that?”

“There’s just something about you that tells me that,” Derek replied cryptically as he opened the door to the car. “You might not believe it, but someday you will. Now, shall we go?”

Dillon didn’t know how to respond. He thought that maybe Derek was just trying to be nice. Kind of like those people who just say good stuff about you but might not mean it; they’re just trying to be positive but have nothing logical to back it up with. He let the thought drop and climbed into the car.

As they headed down the road toward the information center they didn’t know what to expect, if anything. In a few minutes they knew they would find out. It was that anticipation of the unknown that had Dillon nervous. His stomach was in knots. He looked over at Derek and saw a man who appeared focused on one task and one task only: to find out what happened to John.

Dillon had this strange feeling, as the hairs on the back of his neck stood up, that the only thing that would stop Derek was death itself.

He really hoped it didn’t come down to that.

20

AN ENCOUNTER WITH A SNAKE

The first few seconds of the trip were quiet as Derek and Dillon kept their thoughts to themselves.

"So … how was your day?" Dillon asked, trying to break the silence.

Derek just smiled and kept his eyes forward, not saying a word.

"Do you like being an agent for a secret organization?"

Silence.

Dillon looked around for something to fidget with as Derek didn't seem to be in a talkative mood. He was trying his hardest to break the awkward silence but was failing miserably.

He didn't really know this guy and now he was in a car with him heading out to do who-knew-what as they really didn't know what to expect. It was weird though. Dillon just had this feeling that he could trust Derek and he didn't know why. It was the same kind of feeling he had when he knew that the watch was important somehow but could not explain how he knew that. Or the feeling he had with the arrowhead, and when he just knew he had to hide the watch and the arrowhead in his room which saved them from being discovered when his room was searched. In each of these circumstances his gut had been right.

Maybe his trust in the man showed his naiveté as he was only twelve and didn't have much life experience yet? No, he reasoned. There was something else. At least he hoped his feelings were accurate because this is how kids ended

up going missing! Maybe Derek was going to take him and sell him as a child laborer somewhere he thought. He laughed inside. There were easier ways to steal a kid then to fabricate some fanciful tale of working for a secret organization who is trying to help a member of theirs who had disappeared. Not to mention Derek saving his life. No. He believed that Derek was telling the truth and that the man did need his help finding John. Dillon pushed all the unpleasant thoughts aside and rehearsed all the weird stuff that had happened up to this point which confirmed Derek's story.

"So I've been meaning to ask you something but I keep forgetting," Dillon piped up at last as he produced the small metal object he found when the coyote burst into flames in front of him. "What's this?"

Derek took it from Dillon's hand and glanced at it. "I don't know. Where did you find it?"

"It came out of one of those creatures that attacked me at the center."

"How did you get it?"

"I found it in the pile of ash after it burned up. I figured it would be important, or at least a clue of something, but I haven't been able to find out what it is or what it does."

Derek looked equally as puzzled as he handed it back to Dillon. "There are more than enough mysteries happening here that we need to crack," he said soberly.

Dillon nodded as he placed it back in his pocket.

"So how did you get involved with The Orion Group?" Dillon asked, trying to pry more information out of his new friend. And now that Derek was actually speaking he thought he would capitalize on the opportunity for him to learn more.

Derek was silent for a moment. "It's a long story Dillon," he said cryptically. Dillon figured that it was probably a good idea to leave it at that. He was sure that Derek would open up to him when he felt he wanted to and not a moment before.

"So … do you have a family?" Dillon asked, thinking that the question was innocent enough and less invasive.

Derek glanced over at him and then looked to the road again without saying a word.

“Sorry, but I get talkative when I’m nervous.”

“It’s gonna be okay Dillon,” Derek reassured, not even looking over at him. “I’ll do everything I can to keep you safe. As a matter of fact, when we find the entrance I don’t want you coming in with me. After I’m finished what I need to do, I’ll take you back to the resort.”

Dillon liked the man’s confidence, but didn’t like the suggestion that Derek didn’t want him seeing it through to the end. “But … ” he stammered.

“No Dillon!” Derek said as he raised his voice. “Your job ends when we find the entrance.”

He immediately calmed. “You’ve done well. Very well. Better than anyone could have expected, but I can’t have you risking your life anymore.”

“But I’m still in danger,” Dillon argued.

“Not if I can neutralize the aggressor. That should give you peace of mind.”

Dillon thought of a hundred good arguments about why he should go with Derek but realized that they would be of no use. Instead, he sat silently for the rest of the drive. When they arrived, Derek turned off his headlights before he came to a stop in front of the center.

As the two of them got out the first thing they noticed was the stillness in the air. There was no wind and there weren’t any clouds in the sky. The stars shone brightly. Here, practically in the middle of nowhere, the sky burst to life with sparkling light. Dillon always marvelled at the sereneness of it all. He looked back toward the resort and saw the lights shining on the horizon.

He was suddenly brought back to reality, however, with the far off sound of a coyote. He shivered slightly. He knew that those coyotes out there at that moment were most likely not the demonic kind that tried to kill him a few days earlier; but the sound of them nonetheless sent a chill down his spine.

Derek went to the trunk, opened it up, and slung John’s backpack onto one of his shoulders. “After we find the entrance I’m going to need the compass.”

Dillon looked at him curiously at first then clued in—the watch with its accompanying arrowhead. Derek smiled when he saw the lights go on in

Dillon's head. "Come on," he said as he started moving across the street toward the center. Dillon followed close behind.

When they got to the door Derek pulled out his phone tapped one of the apps on it and then reached in his pocket for a short cord that had a key-looking thing on the end of it. He plugged the key into the door and the other end into his phone. Dillon watched and marvelled. In a moment the alarm system was shut down and the lock turned open.

"That's awesome!" Dillon whispered a little louder than he meant to. "How can I get an app like that?" he asked a little quieter.

"It's standard issue," replied Derek with a smirk.

"Just like the other device you used on John's house?" Dillon asked with a smile. "I'm starting to like this Orion Group," he said in admiration. "Hey why didn't you use that other device on this door?"

"That one won't work on this type of lock," he replied as he cracked the door open and he and Dillon slipped inside. He then reached in his pocket and pulled out a small flashlight and started to look around cautiously. All seemed normal. "Try to be as quiet as you can," he whispered to Dillon as he drew out his hand gun. "Just because the place looks empty doesn't mean it is. Trust me. I've had a ton of experience with this stuff."

Dillon swallowed hard as he followed Derek through the maze of merchandise to the back hallway. As they moved through the place Dillon spotted a 360 degree security camera staring at them from the ceiling. He tugged on Derek's arm and pointed it out.

"Don't worry," said Derek in hushed tones. "It's stuck on the images which were being filmed just before we opened the door."

"Another app?"

"Yup."

"That's cool!"

Derek smiled for a moment then turned cold-faced as he continued through the center. "Just in case you're wondering, we're heading to the back room first because that's where you said Tom Tom disappeared from. That's probably the most likely spot for an entrance to an underground lair." Dillon just knew that

Derek's years of training and self-discipline must have been kicking in as he was probably beginning to expect the worst. Dillon understood the logic of his reasoning clearly and followed closely behind.

They made it to the back room without incident. It was pretty much the same as it was the last time Dillon had seen it; nothing was out of the ordinary. "I'm sure the entrance is in here somewhere," Derek said as he turned to Dillon. "Let's fan out and look around."

Dillon nodded, not wanting to appear scared. The truth was that he was terrified! He had already been attacked once by creatures that seemed demonic and wasn't interested in going through that again. Nevertheless he steeled his nerves, pulled out his phone, turned on the light, and took the opposite side of the room from Derek.

"Just yell if you see something," Derek said as he moved behind some boxes.

Dillon searched the wall area first then started to move into the inside. He could hear Derek move boxes and racks out of the way as he looked. They both searched for what seemed to be a long while. In reality it was less than fifteen minutes.

"See anything yet?" asked Derek from the darkness.

"No. You?"

"Nothing. There has to be a hidden door or something here somewhere," Derek said. His tone starting to edge toward frustration. "Let's move some of these boxes around and take a thorough look."

Derek met Dillon in the middle and they started moving the boxes out of the way and looking more closely at the floor. Dillon was down on his knees trying to discern whether or not there were edges to a door or something when a thought struck him. He pulled out the watch and arrowhead, attached them, and waited to see what happened. At first the arrow head kept pointing toward Derek.

"Hey Derek. Are you still carrying that stone from John's backpack?"

Derek nodded.

"Let's take it out for a moment and chuck it as far as you can to the other side of the room."

“Why?” Derek asked.

“I have a hunch that this stone comes from somewhere below the Oasis and that John knew it could lead him to the entrance, but we won’t know if that stone is anywhere near the arrowhead as that’s all it’s picking up. So I’m thinking—”

“That there’s probably another magnetic field close by that will pull on the arrowhead which should lead us to the entrance,” Derek finished.

“Exactly!”

“That’s ingenious Dillon!” Derek pulled the rock out of the pack and tossed it as far as he could to the entrance where they entered the room. The arrowhead followed the stone at first and then spun around in the opposite direction. Dillon smiled widely. He got up and started following the “needle.” It pointed generally at the back wall and then started to angle toward the corner. Derek joined him and the two of them kept following it until they came to a stop at the corner of the building.

They immediately started feeling the wall for a door way, hatch, or something that would open up but there was nothing. Derek shone his light all up and down the wall in desperation but couldn’t see anything out of the ordinary.

“It’s useless,” he said finally. “Maybe John was wrong about his suspicion.”

“Or maybe not,” replied Dillon as he moved toward Derek who had stepped away from the wall. Dillon looked closely at Derek’s shoulder where he had slung the pack. Derek looked back at him curiously trying to discern where he was staring.

Dillon reached up and touched a loose thread on the bag that was apparently wavering in the breeze. But they were inside and there shouldn’t be any breeze except from an air conditioning unit and the air conditioning vent was on the other side of the room. Derek looked down and saw it as well. Dillon followed the direction of where he thought the breeze was coming from. He put his hand to the floor and moved it ever-so-slightly along. Nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary. Then, out of the corner of his eye he saw the needle on the watch-compass spinning in circles.

He felt around on the floor with more determination until he felt it. There

was a light breeze coming up from between one of the seams in the tile flooring. “Feel this!” Dillon exclaimed.

Derek put his hand to the floor and felt the same light breeze coming up from somewhere below. They exchanged knowing looks. “There’s an open space down there,” Derek said excitedly.

“Ya, but where’s the latch?”

The tile had lots of grooves and smooth rock formations all over it. As Dillon moved his hand slowly along its surface he felt an unnatural depression in part of the stone that appeared to be carved out with a tool or something. It was a little bigger than the size of a finger. He pushed down a little on it and felt it depress like it was under tension. When he removed his finger the piece of tile sprung back up to be flush with the rest of the stone.

He looked up at Derek. “You might want to step back,” he said, a serious expression splayed across his face.

Derek complied without even a word. Dillon pushed down on the tile button. A loud click was heard and then a large square section of the tile gave way and swung down—being hinged on one side—to reveal a dark hole. Immediately they could feel a rush of air enter the room from the corridor below. “This must have been how they grabbed Tom Tom.”

Derek patted Dillon on the back. “Good job kid. Now let’s see where this thing goes,” he said, pulling the backpack off his shoulder and kneeling at the edge of the hole.

Dillon looked into the dark passageway, a chill going up his back.

“Alright kid. I’ll see you in a bit if all goes well,” Derek said as he held his hand out indicating that he needed the watch and arrowhead. Dillon was about to hand it over when they suddenly heard a low hissing sound coming from somewhere in the direction of the entrance to the room.

“What was that?” Dillon blurted.

They spun around and saw something moving through the merchandise, toppling boxes, and knocking over racks. Derek pulled his gun. Both he and Dillon shone their lights in the direction trying to discern what was coming at them. Whatever it was, it was getting closer. “We know you’re there! Come

out!” Derek screamed.

The hissing was getting louder.

“Get behind me Dillon!” Derek yelled. Dillon didn’t have to be asked twice.

Out of the darkness a large snakelike creature emerged, towering about seven feet. It had a large head, yellow glowing eyes, and two thick arms riddled with scales and ending in three clawed fingers.

Dillon’s face went pale, but Derek steeled his look and tightened his stance. He fired two shots into the creatures torso. It appeared to sting the beast as it recoiled slightly. Then it whipped it’s head around and lunged.

Derek pushed Dillon out of the way as he dove to the other side. He crashed into the wall, while Dillon skidded across the floor, scraping his knees and elbows on the rough tile.

The creature had dived passed the two and was already turning for another strike. It was about to pounce at Dillon when suddenly the lights to the room came on. The creature recoiled at the brightness. Derek shot it again. It flinched and hissed at him but turned toward Dillon. It launched at him, pushing itself with its strong tail. Dillon knew he didn’t have time to get clear and thought that this was the last thing he would ever see. The snake-thing was about to grab him with its thick arms when Dillon felt himself flying through the air to the side as something tackled him. He hit the floor again forcefully, the wind being blasted from his lungs. He struggled, unsure of what flew into him when he noticed that his brother Jordan was on top of him.

“What?” he yelled in confusion.

“You just gonna let that thing get you, you dork?” Jordan yelled at him.

Dillon didn’t know what to think. It seemed surreal that Jordan was here but he didn’t have time to process it. He noticed Derek run up beside him and his brother, gun in one hand and his combat knife in the other. Bang! Another shot rang out.

The creature responded by swiping Derek across the chest with its claws. Derek grunted as three lines of blood appeared on his shirt. By this time Dillon and Jordan were back up on their feet. Derek shot again and wheeled around to the brothers. He dropped John’s pack at their feet. “Take it and go!” he yelled at

them.

Dillon hesitated. “Take it!” he yelled again as he turned back and barely ducked another strike from the beast.

Dillon scooped it up quickly and moved to the side where the hole in the floor was. Jordan grabbed his arm. “Where are you going?”

“We don’t have time,” Dillon responded emphatically glancing over Jordan for a moment to see Derek engaged with the creature.

Jordan glanced back then turned toward Dillon. “I see what you mean.”

The snake noticed the two brothers as it backhanded Derek aside. The man flew into some boxes and toppled a couple of clothing racks. Dillon locked eyes with the thing for a moment. He knew it was going to strike. “Go!” he yelled to his brother.

Jordan leaped into the dark hole.

The snake launched at Dillon just as he jumped in behind his brother. The clawed hand ripped through the air just above the boy’s head as he descended into the darkness.

Dillon hit the ground hard and almost started to tumble down what seemed to be stairs, but managed to catch himself. He noticed that Jordan wasn’t there and heard some faint grunts coming from down the staircase. He looked up and saw the snake peering into the hole. It looked as though it was going to try and climb down. Its head started to slither through when suddenly it was hit by something. It hissed as though it was in pain and pushed away from the hole. Dillon flinched, which caused him to lose his footing and he started to tumble down the stairs into the darkness. He tried to stop his descent but couldn’t get a hold of anything to help and the stairs were way too steep.

As he tumbled into the darkness he could hear more shots ring out from the room above. Those eventually drowned out as he rolled and slid deeper into the gloom.

21

INTO THE DARKNESS

The two brothers screamed as they bounced and slid, slid and bounced. Fortunately for them the stairs seemed to be coated with some sort of fungus which cushioned their rapid descent more than it would have if it was just bare stone. They slid for what seemed forever and then were spit out at the bottom into a large room. They rolled and then came to a stop. Neither of them wanted to get up and just laid there looking at the ceiling.

The room had a small glow to it. Dillon could feel the sweat form on the palms of his hands. He started to breathe a little heavier as he took in his surroundings; familiarity to them struck him like lightening as he knew these were the same images from his dreams—his nightmares.

He slowly climbed to his feet and tried to shake the dirt from his clothes. Jordan was up as well and came storming over to him.

“You better tell me what’s going on right now little bro!” he yelled as he came right up to Dillon and grabbed him by one of the straps on his pack.

Dillon tried to pull away but Jordan’s grasp was too much. “Okay okay,” he said, trying to calm his brother down. Jordan let go. He was about to answer when a curious expression came across his face.

“How did you know where I was?” he asked. “And how did *you* get to the center anyway?”

“I’m not telling you anything until you start talking!” Jordan let go and shoved Dillon back.

Dillon paused for a moment trying to collect his thoughts. “Okay, okay,” he said, patting his hands in the air trying to get Jordan to calm down. “Well … a man named John Taylor Sebastian went missing about a year and a half ago as he was investigating the source of the Oasis’s rejuvenating power.”

“And this friend of yours?” Jordan asked.

“He apparently works for the group who wanted John and his team to find the answer to this mystery. This group that he works for—The Orion Group—are the ones who staged Dad to get the trip here.”

“What! Why would they do that?”

Dillon paused, trying to think of the best way to explain it to Jordan without sounding like a total crackpot.

“Well—?” Jordan’s frustration began to be more evident as Dillon didn’t immediately answer.

“Because they think that I have some abilities that will be able to help them.” He knew it sounded stupid but it was the truth. There it was. He was now officially a crackpot!

“What kind of abilities?” asked Jordan skeptically.

“I notice things,” replied Dillon cryptically. *Great! That sounded even stupider!* he thought to himself. “I don’t know how to explain it, but I observe things that others don’t.”

Jordan looked at him without saying a word, then smirked. “Sure you do,” he said sarcastically. “There must have been some kind of mistake with this Orion Group drafting you. I mean … you’re only twelve! You can barely look after yourself let alone help some secret organization find a missing person. It’s like believing that I can shoot lasers out of my butt!”

“Believe what you want then,” Dillon said with a dismissive wave.

Jordan was silent for a moment. “Sorry man. I’m just confused about all this. It’s a lot to process. How about you use your special abilities and get us outa here. And we’re *not* going back up there!” he said, indicating the stairs they rolled down.

“No you don’t,” Dillon replied. “It’s your turn now. We’re not going anywhere until you tell me how you are even here!”

Jordan shrugged as if it was no big deal. “I knew you were up to something ever since I saw you talking to your *friend* when we were at the amusement park. Then there was your reaction to me when I came out of the haunted house.”

Dillon blushed a little.

“I definitely knew something weird was going on then. It wasn’t like you to act that way. And when you and Claire went to town I tracked your phone and cross-referenced it with google maps. You were nowhere near the library.”

“Wow,” Dillon said, impressed by his brothers ingenuity. “Why didn’t you tell Mom and Dad?”

Jordan snorted. “That’s not what brothers do bro. Besides, I figured you had your reasons for sneaking around. I just didn’t think it was *this,”* he said with a wave of the hand displaying their immediate surroundings. “And … ” he started to say with a mischievous smile.

“And what?” Dillon asked.

“And there might be a time in the future when I need a favor from you, which I am sure you will be more than happy to help with now that I know your ‘secrets.’”

Dillon paused, digesting what his brother was implying. He realized now that, despite his earlier heroics, Jordan was still the same old Jordan: always trying to get something out of him.

“Okay, okay, I get it,” he resigned. I just still don’t get *how* you got here?”

“Oh yeah … ” said Jordan, almost as though he had forgotten where he was in his story. “So because I knew you were lying about your’s and Claire’s excursion to town I thought I would keep a closer eye on you for the next while; and it’s a good thing I did. So after you left the room I followed you to your meeting spot with your friend, snuck into the back of the car, and voila … here I am!” he said, brimming with pride.

“But how did you get passed Dad?” Dillon asked, his curiosity peaked.

“Well that was the strange thing. I waited for Dad to get in the elevator and then went down the staircase on the opposite end of the hallway because I thought that’s the one you took. But when I got to the side door and outside the hotel I didn’t see you anywhere. I honestly didn’t think you would try to sneak

out through the lobby!”

Dillon blushed, remembering his lack of reconnoissance which forced him to go through the lobby.

“I was about to head back inside, thinking that I missed you when I saw you head down the street through the crowd and into the tree line,” Jordan continued. “I followed you through the trees, around the guard house and, when you were having a conversation with your friend up there, I snuck into the back of the car. ”

“Wow,” Dillon said again. “That’s quite the story. I didn’t think you were that observant,” he said with a smirk. “You’ve really impressed me big bro.”

“Ya, I’ve been known to surprise people from time to time. Not just a dumb teenager am I?” he said with a smile.

Before Dillon could respond Jordan’s face suddenly took on a deadly serious demeanour. “That’s not the most interesting part of the story though,” he said, looking Dillon in the eyes. “Just before I managed to get to the door, while I was still climbing out of the car, I saw a van pull up in front.” Dillon’s heart skipped a beat. “Before I knew what was going on, someone got out and opened the back door to the van and out came that snake-thing from upstairs. Thankfully, whoever that was, didn’t see me. He opened the door to the center and let the creature inside, then went back and sat in the van. I texted you to get out of there, but you didn’t respond.”

Dillon pulled out his phone, but the battery was dead. “I guess I missed it."

Dillon shuddered as he thought about the creature again, and how Derek was still up there with it. “How did you get in here then with the van out front?” Dillon asked.

“As soon as he went back into the van I got out of the car and snuck up beside it. I got a glimpse of his reflection from the mirror and noticed that he was preoccupied with looking at an iPad or something. I figured that he was too busy to notice me so I rushed inside as quickly and quietly as possible. I heard the commotion in the back room as soon as I got inside and ran there as fast as I could—and it’s a good thing I did!”

“I’ll say,” Dillon agreed. “I’d be snake chow right now if you hadn’t gotten

here when you did."

At this point Dillon knew it would be wise not to tell Jordan about his dreams, even though they seemed to be living one of those right now.

They both looked around trying to take in their surroundings for the first time since they came crashing down the stairs. They appeared to be in a naturally shaped cave. The room was squarish with a tall ceiling that was about ten feet high. They could only make out a little of what they saw from the strangely glowing fungi that clung to the ceiling and walls. The absolute silence of the place was eery.

Dillon reached in the backpack and pulled out the flashlight. As he shone it around the room he just knew that this was the very same place he had seen in his dreams.

"Okay. There should be another hall, tunnel, or something like that out of this room over here," Dillon said as he flashed the light in the direction, walked passed his brother, and headed to the other side of the chamber.

"Right—your 'special ability' told you that," mocked Jordan. As he followed he pulled out his phone thinking to see if he had any bars and also to engage his flashlight function.

"That won't work," Dillon said as he noticed what Jordan was trying to do.

"What—" he started to respond then noticed that his battery was dead. "How did you know that?"

"Lucky guess," Dillon replied. Jordan stowed his phone again and came to stand beside his brother. Dillon found the tunnel he was talking about without any issues, but before they entered it he quickly went over to the far wall and shined his light right where he knew the symbol on the wall would be. Sure enough it was there. The back of the hairs on Dillon's neck stuck out and a shiver went down his spine.

Jordan looked to the symbol then back to Dillon. "What is it?" he asked.

"I don't know. It keeps showing up so I can't help but think that it's important somehow." Dillon noticed that the writing he saw around the symbol in his dream was missing again.

Jordan was quiet as Dillon pondered its meaning for a moment.

“Okay we should get going,” Dillon finally said after trying to process what was happening to him. He was scared. But he knew he had to stay strong and see this through. He wondered why he was only able to get glimpses of some of the events in his dream, and whether or not they were actually future events, like some sort of premonition, or if it was all just a coincidence. Something was unnerving here. He also wondered if Gwen would fit into all of this? Maybe his dreams were only images of what *might* happen, not necessarily what *will* happen?

Before they went into the tunnel he gave Jordan the flashlight and took out a torch and lighter. Dillon dug around for a moment and produced a small bottle of something that was in the bag. It was marked “oil.” He unstoppered it and put a bit of the oil on the cloth that was entwined on the end of the torch. Then he sparked the lighter and lit it up. It was surprisingly bright for an old fashioned tool.

“Who uses torches nowadays!” Jordan exclaimed as the dry stick came to life.

“Someone who knows that electronics aren’t going to be very useful down here,” Dillon answered, as he pulled out a hunting knife from the bag before slinging it back on his shoulders again. He reached into his pocket and produced the makeshift compass. The arrowhead needle was stuck in a constant state of spin.

“Where’d you get that?” Jordan asked, bending lower to get a better look at it.

“It used to be John Taylor Sebastian’s. Dillon examined it more. I think he has it somehow locked on locating the specific magnetism that’s in these rocks. I’m not sure how it works, but because of this little watch we were able to find this place. Unfortunately, I don’t think it’s going to be of any more help down here.” Dillon held it up for his brother to see more clearly. Jordan watched as the compass spun and spun and spun.

“I guess everything down here is radiating that stuff,” Jordan concluded. Dillon nodded.

“Come on, we have to keep moving,” Dillon said as he started down the

passage. He suddenly stopped after a few steps and looked back at Jordan. “And just so you know, there are creatures down here too,” he said cryptically as he handed his brother the knife he pulled from the bag.

Jordan stared at Dillon with a stunned expression and his body visibly shuddered. He grabbed the knife and nodded grimly as he followed his brother into the darkness.

22

SPIDERS

The only thing that the two brothers could hear as they walked slowly down the passageway was the sound of their own steps, and the crackle of the torch as the flame burned on. Dillon waved the torch from side to side as he walked, trying to illuminate the long tunnel as much as he could. Jordan also moved the flashlight around trying to get better views as he went. After about twenty feet into the tunnel they came to an intersection.

"Which way now Genius?" Jordan asked.

Dillon moved the torch to the left passage then to right passage. He was about to move the torch back to the left when something caught his eye on the wall. There appeared to be an arrow chalked onto the wall pointing down that passage. He looked back to his brother who was now standing beside him, equally curious about the marking.

"Who do you suppose made that?" Jordan asked.

"I don't know," Dillon replied. "But I know one thing for sure, it wasn't John."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well let's think about it for a moment," Dillon responded. "John had packed this bag that we have so he could come and investigate this place, but he left it in his room. He even sent the watch and arrowhead away from here to someone at The Orion Group probably in the hopes that if something happened to him they would be able to use it to find him, which we have." Dillon shook his head. "No.

I don’t think John ever made it down here. I think he knew that someone was onto him, but didn’t have time to get out before they grabbed him.”

“Then why do you think he’s down here?” Jordan asked, trying to follow Dillon’s logic.

“That’s the thing. I’m not sure if he is or isn’t,” Dillon said. “Derek seems to think that whoever took John still has him alive. I’m not sure what he bases that on as he didn’t provide any information that would lead me to believe that.”

“So we’re just following the blind hunches of a stranger?” Jordan’s anger was now evident.

“Shhhh! Remember what I told you about possible creatures being down here?” Dillon reprimanded. “Anyway, we’ll never know for sure unless we continue on.”

“Whoa! Little bro. The only thing I want to do is find the way out before we get killed or eaten or both. Or be killed *by* being eaten!” Jordan said as he waved the point of the knife he was carrying in Dillon’s direction.

“Yes, but the only way we know for sure how to get out of here is back the way we came where that, whatever-it-was, was trying to kill us! Going forward is our only option Jordan.”

Jordan thought for a moment, contemplating their situation. “Fine,” he said at length. “Lead on.”

Dillon nodded and continued down the passageway. They went another twenty feet or so and came to another intersection and saw another one of those arrow markings leading down the left one this time. Dillon moved down that passage without saying a word as Jordan followed. Then they saw another intersection with an arrow marking leading down the right passage this time. “This has to be marked out for whoever it is that works down here so they don’t get lost,” Dillon said as he worked out the logic in his head.

“You’re probably right,” Jordan replied. “I can’t think of any other reason why these are here. Can you?”

Dillon looked at him and shook his head.

“Great! So if we follow these we run into bad guys!”

Jordan’s exclamation sent a chill down Dillon’s back. If he was right, then

they were heading somewhere that didn't have good prospects for their continued health. On the other hand, they would probably find John.

Not too much further down the passage, as the light illuminated to the extent of its reach they noticed that there was a split in the tunnel which branched into two again. They also noticed that something, or someone, was lying on the ground right at the intersection. They slowed their pace not knowing what to expect. As they got closer Dillon recognized the clothes that the person was wearing.

"Gwen!" he yelled as he broke into a run, closing the gap quickly between him and his sister. He reached her and knelt beside her, touching her shoulder and trying to rouse her. She groaned as he did so. Jordan also ran up and knelt beside their sister.

After a few seconds Gwen's eyes fluttered open. She smiled weakly as she noticed Dillon and Jordan. "Wha—" she tried to speak but the words wouldn't come. She appeared so groggy.

"Don't try to speak yet Gwen," advised Jordan as he rubbed his hand on her head. He looked at Dillon, concern in his eyes.

"Why would she be here?" Jordan whispered to his brother.

All Dillon could do was shrug. He saw her in his dream but didn't think she would actually be down here. As he and Jordan were moving through the tunnel he actually began to believe that maybe his dream was wrong; maybe it was only giving him generalities of what was happening, or could potentially happen. In truth, the dreams already differed a little from what he actually experienced to this point; most notably was the missing details of his and Jordan's conversation. That dream wasn't that specific; it was more like faded snippets of the general event.

This much was true now though, the important details of their current events had come to pass. Suddenly Dillon cocked his head up.

"What?" Jordan asked in surprise.

"We need to go," Dillon responded sharply. "We need to go now!"

Jordan's face went suddenly serious. "Okay," he said as he reached his arms around Gwen and hoisted her up. "Come on Gwen. It's time to go."

She nodded weakly, but was able to stand with the boy's help.

"Which way?" Jordan asked.

Dillon shone his light between the two passages and noted that there was an arrow etching on the passage to the right pointing that way. "This way."

"Wait a minute Dillon," Jordan cut in, grabbing his arm. "Didn't you say that these were probably made by someone—probably the bad guys—who worked down here? Probably someone who would most likely kill us if they got the chance? I don't know about you, but what I've experienced so far in dealing with these people, whoever they are, is that I really don't want to meet them. We are probably walking into their secret lair or something. And no one likes it when you just waltz into their secret lair! So if we can go another way that maybe leads out without meeting up with them, then I think that's a better option."

Dillon couldn't refuse his logic. It was clear that, if John was alive, he would be down here with these guys. It was also clear that these people weren't friendly. Dillon was starting to agree with his brother about not wanting to meet any of them anytime soon, even if he had to abandon his quest to find John. Seeing Gwen down here made him desire nothing more than to get out—and fast!

"Alright," he said as he started walking down the passage to the left. Before going too far he stopped and looked at Jordan. "Give me your knife for a second."

"What for?"

"Let's make our own marks, just in case."

Jordan got what he was saying and scraped an X in the side of the tunnel. It wasn't as noticeable as the arrows were, but it would at least be noticed by them if they had to come back this way.

After Jordan was finished, and they began moving again, he couldn't shake the images of the spider-like creatures he saw in his dream, or the jump they were forced to take off the cliff. He couldn't help but think—and hope—that these events could be altered somehow, but he wasn't sure. In fact, he wasn't confident of anything anymore. The dreams had come true to a point. The only difference was that Jordan and Gwen were in the dreams but never together. This

puzzled Dillon more than a little, but it also gave him hope that maybe he could somehow change the outcome of what was about to happen.

As his mind whirred with these confusing thoughts something on the wall caught his attention. It was the symbol!

“Oh no,” he blurted.

“What?” Jordan asked in a panicked tone.

“Watch out behind you!” Dillon yelled as he pushed Jordan and Gwen aside just in time to see a giant spider-like creature with two large glowing yellow eyes emerge from the darkness.

Jordan and Gwen stumbled into the wall as Dillon swung his torch at the leaping creature. The flaming stick hit the beast right on one of its bulbous eyes and sent it flying to the floor. The thing screeched and stumbled around, trying to get up. Dillon hit it again and again until thick black goo came spraying out of it. It twitched a little and then stopped moving. Surprisingly the torch still held a bit of a flame, albeit less than before.

Gwen broke into tears as Jordan grabbed her and pulled her away from the thick hairy mush that was on the tunnel floor.

“What was … ” Jordan began to say but Dillon put up a hand to silence him.

“Do you hear that?” he asked sharply.

Jordan cupped Gwen’s mouth with his hand as he listened. “I hear—” he began to say when they suddenly saw it: dozens of yellow eyes coming at them from out of the gloom through the passage they just came down. Jordan shined his light in that direction and, as the creatures came into its glow, they screeched and slowed, but continued to advance.

“They don’t like the light!” Jordan yelled as he and his siblings started backing away.

“Quick then! We need to move further down the tunnel. Keep shining the light back there as we run,” Dillon instructed Jordan.

As they moved, one of the creatures broke free from the pack, climbed the wall and scurried across the roof. Dillon glanced back just in time to see it coming down at Jordan. Reflexively, his brother shot out his hand that had the knife and stabbed the creature right in one of its bulging eyes. He was forced to

run backwards as he tried to keep the light shining down the passage. The thing screeched and snapped at Jordan with its pincers. Jordan hit it with the flashlight a couple of times then quickly flicked his wrist and sent the beast sprawling to the floor.

Dillon turned his head again and ran even faster with Gwen in tow.

Every time he turned and glanced back to see how Jordan was making out, he noticed that more of the creatures were trying to break free of the immediate glow of the flashlight.

Dillon noticed that Jordan was trying hard to keep himself from stumbling as the torch wasn't putting out as much light as it was earlier, the flashlight was beginning to dim, and the tunnel in front of them was getting darker. Thankfully the light glow from the fungi on the ceiling helped to illuminate some of the dark spots. The kids moved as fast as they could but the creatures were still gaining on them.

As Dillon ran he started to hear what sounded like a waterfall. "Great!" he said out loud as he knew what was coming. Sure enough, the passage led out onto a ledge with open air and darkness before them. He knew this was here because of his dreams, but the dreams never showed him whether or not they survive the fall. At that moment the troubling thought hit him that maybe that's why he never had any dreams about experiences that stretched beyond this point?

He stopped a few feet before the ledge and put his arm out in order to grab Gwen. She stopped abruptly, being startled when Dillon grabbed her. Jordan came through last. He quickly came up to them and turned fully around to face the tunnel they had just come through. He was out of breath—they all were.

Dillon turned to see that the creatures had started to make their way onto the ledge. They slowed and started to fan out as if to corner their prey.

"What's the call little bro?" Jordan asked between gasps.

Dillon shook his head in disbelief. "There's only one thing we can do," he replied as he grabbed Gwen, looked at Jordan for a moment, and then leaped from the ledge and into the darkness. Gwen let out a shriek of surprise as her and Dillon fell from view.

JORDAN WATCHED IN HORROR AS HIS BROTHER AND SISTER PLUNGED INTO THE gloom. He looked back at the creatures who snapped at him with their pincers as they stalked in. His heart pounded in his chest, and his breathing came in quick gasps as his lungs tried to pull in the much needed air.

He waved the flashlight around menacingly trying to keep the creatures at bay. One of them broke free from the pack and leaped at him. Reflexively he swung the flashlight and batted the thing as hard as he could on its bulbous body which sent it flying over the edge of the cliff. Its squeal was horrifying as it plunged into the darkness.

Before anymore could attempt to strike a killing blow at their prey Jordan turned and leaped from the ledge.

23

THE LAB

Dillon could feel the rush of the cool air as he and Gwen plummeted into the dark. Despite having to hang onto his little sister he somehow managed to keep hold of the torch with his other hand. The flame whipped wildly in the air but refused to extinguish.

Gwen continued to scream as they fell. Dillon's heart pounded, and his stomach felt as though it was stuck in his throat. He tried to look down to see if the light illuminated enough of their fall in order to get a glimpse of what was coming, but tears streamed from his eyes which made it impossible to tell. Then he felt it: the cold rush of water encompass his body. The torch went out. Dillon instinctively let go of his sister and torch as he tried frantically to surface. As his head popped out of the water his lungs forced him to take in a deep breath. A moment later Gwen came up, gasping for air. Dillon quickly swam over and grabbed her just under the arms. Gwen kick and thrashed about wildly. Dillon did everything he could to hold on without both of them going under.

"Gwen!" he yelled, trying to get her attention. "Gwen, it's okay. I've got you," he said, this time in a calmer voice. "It's okay. It's okay."

After a moment he managed to calm her down as he swam them both to the side. He wasn't sure if Jordan was coming. He hoped that Jordan was coming. But he didn't want to be in the way of him landing in the water.

As he swam he looked around and noticed that the room they were in seemed to be lit up by that same glowing substance they had seen earlier. About a dozen

feet or so from where they were was a ledge that opened up onto solid ground. It looked like an open room as Dillon could make out in the dim glow a door at the far end. His mind had trouble processing it as it seemed out of place from the rest of the tunnels they had been through, and this underground cavern and waterway.

As he swam harder in an effort to get him and Gwen to the shore he noticed a light from above swirling around in all directions and coming in fast. Jordan's screams could be heard echoing around as he descended rapidly. Dillon kicked even harder, trying to put more distance between Jordan and themselves. Jordan hit the water—waves exploding all around from the impact. Dillon and Gwen got hit by the wave. It drenched them all over again, but the impact helped to propel them closer to the shore.

"We're over here!" Dillon hollered as soon as he noticed Jordan surface. His legs felt as though they were about to give out, but as he reached back with his hand he felt the edge of the shoreline.

With as much energy as he could muster he pulled Gwen closer to the solid ground. "Here Gwen. Grab onto this," he said through gritted teeth.

Once they were out of the water they flopped over onto their backs and lay there, trying to catch their breaths. A moment later Jordan joined them.

"Well … that was … fun," Jordan said between gasps of breath.

Dillon got up, took his pack off, and slung it to the side before flopping back down again.

Another long moment went by before they heard Gwen say, "I'm cold."

Jordan quickly moved up close beside her and wrapped her in a big hug. "It's okay," he said reassuringly. "It's actually not that cold down here." By saying that he was telling the truth. In fact, the temperature down there was quite warm. "Trust me. You'll warm up right away."

Dillon grabbed his pack again as he rose to his feet. "I don't suppose that flashlight still works?" he asked his brother.

Surprisingly, Jordan still had it in his grasp but the light was out. He shook it a few times and water came pouring out of it. "Nope," he replied.

Dillon looked around. They were in some sort of square room that appeared

to be manmade. The walls and floors were made from the same natural stone that the rest of the place was, but there were light fixtures and other pipes running along the ceiling. There were also old racks and a couple of broken tables and chairs scattered throughout.

“Obviously there used to be people down here doing who knows what,” Dillon stated as he walked to the other side of the room. He found a light switch beside the door and flicked it on. Some of the fixtures flickered to life while others remained out and one even had a light bulb explode. The kids jumped as they were startled by the sudden explosion.

“Do you think it’s wise turning that on?” Jordan whispered loudly to Dillon.

His brother merely shrugged. “Too late now.”

The door had a large coating of dust and cobwebs on it which made it look as though it hadn’t been opened in a long time. The top portion had a large window in it that was equally coated with thick dust. Dillon swiped his hand across it making a large clear spot, disturbing the dust which floated into the air causing him to cough. The window looked as though it was naturally fogged which would allow light to come in and exit, but would prevent anyone from seeing exactly what was happening on one side or the other. Through the clear spot that Dillon had made the kids could see a little bit of light on the other side. The light appeared to be far away or faded somehow.

“There’s gotta be someone down there,” Jordan observed.

“I guess there’s only one way to find out,” Dillon said as he reached for the door handle. The door seemed like it was welded in place. Dillon tugged and reefed on the door with all his might but it wouldn’t budge. Jordan moved him aside and pushed on the door—even giving it a quick shot with his shoulder—and it swung open. He waved for Dillon to go first, giving him a knowing smirk. Dillon just shook his head as he walked through. Gwen giggled at her brother’s playful silent banter.

The hallway on the other side appeared to be more constructed than the natural stone look of the room they just came through. It was almost as though they had entered a hospital—an old hospital—with the design of the tiled floor, walls that appeared to be drywalled, and false ceiling that most likely concealed

water pipes and electrical wiring.

It was a long hallway and the kids could see light shinning through from probably another room at the end. Dillon and Jordan looked at each other for a moment—both sharing silent concerns—before continuing. Gwen took a hold of a hand from each of her brothers. Dillon saw a light switch on the wall and moved to flick it on, but before he got there Jordan grabbed his arm and shook his head. Dillon withdrew, understanding Jordan's reasoning.

The kids crept down the hall as quietly as they could; their nerves were strung out as taut as they could go. They looked around anxiously, hoping not to encounter any more creatures which might be lurking in the darkness.

As they got closer to the end of the hallway they could hear the low hum of electricity and a few other faint sounds that couldn't quite be discerned. They stopped about ten feet short.

"Okay, you stay here Gwen," Jordan stated as he let go of her and moved her gently against the wall.

"We just need to take a peek," Dillon reassured.

Gwen was not happy about it, but complied anyway.

Dillon and Jordan inched closer to the opening. All they could see at this point was some shelving units with a bunch of what appeared to be glass jars with various colors of liquids in them. The jars all seemed to have labels on them, but from this distance the two brothers couldn't make out any of the writing.

When they got right to the edge they stopped and listened intently, hoping to make out whether or not someone was in the room. They couldn't tell with the hum of electricity. Dillon finally made the decision to peek his head around the corner and see what was going on in there.

He slowly poked his head out and surveyed the whole scope of the room. It appeared to be some sort of lab. There were beakers of fluidic substances in what appeared to be processing equipment. Some were being heated and others mixed. There were a number of computer terminals scattered throughout the room on desks and tables.

Dillon didn't see anyone right away so he crept inside, trying to keep a

watchful eye. Jordan grabbed his arm. “Are you sure this is smart?” he asked.

“How else are we gonna get outta here?” he replied.

The logic must have hit Jordan right away as he released his arm and nodded.

The first thing Dillon noticed was that this room seemed to be kept in better shape than the rest of the places they had been so far. There was a door to the side that was marked with the distinctive “Restroom” sign on it, and at the far end there was another door that was shut.

As he started to go through the room—Jordan right behind him—he noticed, as he moved around some of the shelves, that there were cages lined up on one of the walls which contained various types of animals: snakes, cats, coyotes, rats, and even a goat. Dillon went over to where they were and found that they all seemed to be sedated.

“This place is starting to give me the creeps,” whispered Jordan.

“It’s just starting *now* to give you the creeps?” Dillon asked sarcastically.

Jordan smirked and shrugged. “We should probably see where that other door leads before someone finds us,” he said as he started to walk towards it.

“Just a second,” Dillon said as he went to one of the computer terminals. He picked up the mouse and noticed that the laser on the bottom of it was still lit up which told him that the machine was still on. He put it down and pushed the space bar on the keyboard. The screen came to life and didn’t even ask for a password! He saw that some of the programs where still open—minimized on the toolbar. When he maximized one of them he wasn’t able to make much sense of the scientific mumbo jumbo, but what he did take away from it was that, whoever ran this lab, were producing something called “Genesis” and something called “Necrotoxin.”

“Necrotoxin,” he said out loud as he read.

“What? You mean this,” Jordan said as he held up a syringe he had pulled from a small stand that was on one of the racks. There were probably a dozen such syringes on that stand, all lined up.

Dillon walked over to him and took the syringe. Sure enough it was labeled “Necrotoxin.”

“There was something written on the computer that says this stuff is a byproduct of Genesis,” he stated as he inspected it further. The liquid was dark, dark blue which made it appear almost black. It reminded him of sludge or oil. “What about Genesis? Did you find any of that?”

“What’s that? Oh … here it is,” Jordan said as he pulled another syringe filled with a light blue liquid from a different shelf.

Dillon took that one too. “These somehow counteract each other, but I’m not sure how.” he said as he put them in an outside pocket of his backpack. “We’d better take them just in case.”

“Good idea.”

Jordan started to look around again and got startled by Gwen who was right beside him. “Gwen, I told you to stay out of the room until Dillon and I said it was safe!” he scolded.

“I know. It’s just that … I was scared all by myself,” she whimpered.

“It’s okay,” said Jordan as he patted her on the shoulder. “It looks like everything’s good right now.”

Dillon went back to the computer terminal.

“What are you doing?” Jordan asked.

Dillon was silent for a moment as he clicked away. “Darn!” he yelled as loudly as he dared.

“What?” Jordan asked as he moved over to him.

“Oh, I just thought that maybe I’d be able to send an e-mail to Mom and Dad letting them know what’s going on, but this computer isn’t actually connected to an outside network. Probably due to the depth below ground that we’re at and all the interference from the rocks.”

“It was a good thought anyway,” Jordan replied as he patted his brother on the shoulder.

Dillon nodded and went to the door that was on the other side of the room. He tried to look through the fogged glass to see if he could see anything on the other side. It was no use. The glass was too clouded. Jordan came over and took a peek in the window of the door himself.

“What’s the plan?” he asked.

Dillon shrugged. “I guess we take our chances,” he replied.

“You don’t have any more of those, ‘I know where I’m going’ sort of feelings do you?”

Dillon shook his head and grabbed the door handle. Suddenly the main lights went low, emergency lights started flashing, and an alarm started to blare. The boys covered their ears, trying to dampen the deafening wine of the alarm. They looked behind them and saw Gwen standing beside the wall staring at them with glowing yellow eyes! She had the same eyes as all those creatures they had seen before. Her hand was still holding onto the triggered security alarm that was on the wall.

“What the … ” Dillon spouted. “What are you doing Gwen?” he yelled.

She just stared at them with those glowing eyes—emotionless.

Dillon was about to run over to her when the door behind them burst open and men grabbed them and held them fast. Jordan and Dillon were thrown to the ground hard—the wind being blasted from their lungs. Dillon saw someone walk over beside Gwen and patted her on the head. He couldn’t get a good look at them as he was struggling with the man who had put him on the ground. All he could hear was a woman say, “Good girl Gwen.”

He and Jordan were then picked up as though they weighed nothing. The men twisted their arms around their backs which elicited a grunt from each boy as they were marched down the hallway.

“Gwen! Gwen! What did you do to our sister!” Dillon shouted, trying to look back to see if he could still see her. “Gwen!

24

THE MONSTER

Dillon and Jordan struggled against their captors to no avail as they were led down the long hallway. Their arms were held tightly behind them by what seemed to be an iron grip.

"Where's my sister!" Dillon screamed, wondering what they had done to Gwen that made her eyes glow yellow. The image of the coyotes, rat, and snake came rushing to his mind as he thought about his sister.

"Don't worry," came a smooth woman's voice from behind. "She's right here and doing just fine."

Dillon knew he had heard that voice before. It couldn't be! Images flashed in his mind from a few days back when he had rented the bike from the on-site shop at the resort. He was sure it was the woman at the desk, Tara! *How many of these people are involved in this?* he wondered to himself. His mind whirled with all the possibilities of the different people he met. *Could Janeen be a part of it too?* he thought.

He brought his focus back quickly as he knew he would have to find a way out of this if he and his siblings had a chance of surviving. And he had to resign to the fact that he would have to take Tara's word that Gwen was fine.

The hallway turned and then opened up into another room. Dillon and Jordan were thrown forcefully to the floor. As they began to rise they noticed some cages to the left of them against the wall. The room was large with a high ceiling. It resembled the last room with a dozen or so computer terminals,

chemistry-type equipment with beakers brewing an assortment of different colored liquids, Bunsen burners, and lots of microscopes and lab hand tools strewn about the many counters. A few people in lab coats appeared to be at work at the various stations. They didn't even turn to acknowledge the new arrivals. All of them had the same glowing eyes that Gwen now had.

Dillon looked to the cages and noticed immediately that Tom Tom was slunk down in the corner of one of them. Next to his, in adjoining cells, were a few people he didn't recognize—and next to them was … Derek! Dillon's heart skipped a beat when he saw Derek and Tom Tom still alive. Derek looked like he had a fight with a bus and lost badly! Dillon wasn't even sure if he was still alive.

"But how?" he whispered to himself, unable to understand how Derek could have been brought down here before them, unless there was either another entrance, or he was taken down the direct route that he, Jordan, and Gwen avoided after they found Gwen. Either way, he was just happy to see the man again. He just hoped he was still alive.

As he scanned the room some more he saw, standing next to one of the computer stations, a man that looked familiar. The man turned to him, his eyes were glowing yellow just like Gwen's. Dillon flinched in surprise. It took a second but Dillon finally recognized him. It was John!

John stared at him for a moment with a blank, yellow-eyed, stare and then went back to work.

"Impressive isn't it?" he heard a voice say that jolted him from his shock.

He and Jordan both looked to the side and saw a man coming down some stairs from another hallway at that side of the room. Dillon recognized him immediately. It was Troy! Troy smiled at the two brothers as he entered the room.

"You know … I never thought you would make it this far," he said in a tone that sounded almost impressed.

"So you're the one behind all this," Dillon accused.

"Wait … " Jordan said in a questioning tone. "What *is* all this?" he asked looking to his brother. He glanced over at Troy as a look of recognition played

across his face. “Isn’t that the guy that we met at the front gate when we came in?” Jordan asked.

Troy laughed.

“No offence,” Jordan said cutting Troy’s laugh short. “But you’re not exactly intimidating. You know … ‘*The Gate Keeper*’ and all.”

Troy grinned wickedly and nodded toward him. Suddenly Jordan was lifted off his feet. Dillon couldn’t believe the ease at which the guy who grabbed his brother hoisted him into the air.

“Cool isn’t it?” Troy commented. “It’s called Centrigenix. It’s a chemical compound that affects the nervous and muscular system of a person to such an extent that they are able to perform extraordinary feats; at least, that is, until the effects wear off which, as we just discovered is pretty quick. But Rob there has enough “juice” to last for a little bit longer I think. Long enough to show you some manners.”

As soon as he finished speaking Rob threw Jordan into the air.

JORDAN’S HEART POUNDED AS HE FELT HIMSELF TAKE OFF. “NOOOOOO!” HE heard Dillon scream. He closed his eyes as he slammed into the steel bars of one of the cages. He felt the wind being blown from his lungs as he landed hard on the floor. He writhed around, trying to get up. His vision blurred a little but then came back to normal a few seconds later. His side and his arms hurt. He didn’t think anything was broken but couldn’t be sure. He looked toward Dillon and Gwen and saw that Dillon was racing over to see if he was okay. Rob and the other guy that brought Dillon down the hallway moved as if to go and retrieve him, but Troy put up a hand to stop them.

Dillon stooped down. “Are you okay bro?” he asked urgently.

“Ya, I think so,” replied Jordan with a wince as he felt a sharp pain in his side when he spoke.

DILLON HELPED JORDAN TO HIS FEET, THEN TURNED BACK TO TROY. "WHAT DID you do to my sister and John?" he asked accusingly.

Troy slowly walked over to where Gwen was standing with the woman from the bike shop. "Oh she's fine," he said. "We just implanted her and John with a neurogenic transmitter."

"A neuro what?"

"It's for mind control," he heard Derek say in a weak voice from his cell. "They implanted them with a chip that makes them completely obedient to their commands. It must be the same chip you found in the coyote."

"But why?" Dillon asked.

"Well … you see, John and his team are the scientists that created the original batch of Genesis."

Dillon looked dumbfounded. "But John's an archeologist, not a scientist."

Troy laughed. "No Dillon, actually he's not. You've been fed a line. John was sent to Oasis Resort—undercover posing as an archeologist—in order to track down the location of the serum that we stole a few years ago. It's kind of funny. John did such a good job at playing the part, and with the help of Orion and their vast resources, they were able to fabricate his whole life as an archeologist so that no one would suspect him."

"If you didn't want anyone finding Genesis then why would you even let him come here with a team to look for the supposed source of the springs?" Dillon asked, rather dumbfounded with the whole situation.

Troy laughed again. "Because, over the years we have allowed such expeditions to occur and no one has ever been able to even come close to what we're doing here. We have hidden our secrets quite well. The problem with John, is that he was the creator of this particularly helpful chemical agent, and that gave him an advantage that the others didn't have. He knew its chemical makeup and was able to detect traces of it in certain spots around the resort which allowed him to accurately estimate the location of where we were dumping it into the underground water supply. He's quite brilliant really."

"So then how did you find out that John wasn't who he said he was?"

Troy smirked and looked briefly to one of the cages.

He followed Troy's gaze. "Tom Tom?" Dillon blurted, as the truth dawned on him. He saw the broken man in the cage slump a little more.

"It's not like that," Tom Tom replied weakly. "I didn't … I never meant to … " Tears streamed from the old man's face. "He's my friend."

Dillon didn't know what to think, and Troy seemed to be enjoying the drama as he grinned wickedly.

"After we found out who John really was we figured that it was only a matter of time before he discovered our secret and reported back to The Orion Group." He paused for a moment in self-reflection. "You know, at first we didn't know that Orion was even involved in this, but we made preparations anyway in order to deal with whoever it was once we took John into our care."

"By creating these monsters?" Dillon interjected.

"Yes, and we made a few other provisions, but the Necrotoxic creatures were definitely top of our achievement. You can thank John for those."

Dillon swallowed hard and even flinched a little at the mention of the Necrotoxic creatures.

"John's gifts of manipulating chemical properties is most useful."

"I assume you tortured him into telling you who sent him?" Derek accused.

"No no no, nothing that crude," Troy replied calmly. "We have other ways of finding out the information we need. The neurogenic transmitters don't just allow us to control the mind, but sift it as well. John's knowledge of the science is extremely impressive."

"Do you know why it's called necrotoxin?" he continued. "Because it actually kills the creature and brings it back in a, shall we say, more formidable state. It makes changes to their genetic code and gives them features that aren't natural to them, as you probably noticed with the large snake creature that had arms, or the coyotes that are larger than normal and possess acidic saliva. Before we do that, however, we make sure to implant the neurogenic transmitter first so they are perfectly under control."

"But why did you put one of those neurogenic transmitters in Gwen?" Dillon asked, almost shouting as his anger started to surface.

Troy gave Dillon a dismissive wave as he walked over to where Gwen was.

“It’s really quite simple,” he stated matter-of-factly. “It’s because you were starting to become an annoyance, and Orion kept a pretty close eye on you. We figured that if you somehow managed to find your way down here then we would have to put a contingency plan in place to deal with it. When we were notified that you were on your way through the information center, we snatched up your sister—after dealing with the two Orion agents that were watching your family—and put her in the tunnel and programmed her to alert us of your presence if you made it to the lab facility. It worked pretty well wouldn’t you say?” he stated as he patted Gwen on the head.

“Get your hands off her you jerk!” Jordan yelled through gritted teeth.

“Wouldn’t surveillance cameras be easier than using human pawns?” Dillon asked in disgust.

“Ah, but that’s the problem with working down here Dillon. You must have figured that out by now? Electronics don’t function the same close to these magnetic rocks now do they?”

“Then how are you able to keep the computers in the lab running?”

Troy laughed again. “Man! You are observant and nothing gets passed you, does it? The computers are hooked up to massive generators so we can use them, and even then we can only operate for so long until we have to shut them down. You might have noticed some blackout periods at the resort?”

Dillon thought back and remembered a few of the moments Troy was talking about.

“Those were times when our power here at Oasis Resort was taxed to the max and couldn’t be sustained because of all of this.” He held his arms open dramatically as if totally caught up in his own genius.

“That’s great and all,” Jordan interjected. “But why are you telling us all this?”

Troy turned his attention to Dillon. “So you can see what’s already being accomplished! We’re doing great things, Dillon. Things you could be a part of. John’s scientific genius is great, but we need someone who can spot problems and connections. Someone like you.”

“Well that’s *not* going to happen!” Dillon responded resolutely.

“I was afraid you would say that,” Troy replied as he nodded to Rob, the man who had thrown Jordan into the air a moment earlier. “I guess we will just have to dispose of you and your family. You know too much.” Rob smiled and started to approach the two brothers.

“What are you doing?” Derek asked insistently from his cell. “They’re just boys!”

“You should have thought of that before you got them into this,” Troy snapped back.

“Wait Troy, that wasn’t part of the deal!” Tara exclaimed. “You said you just wanted to capture the kids.”

“Sorry Tara, but things just got more complicated,” replied Troy. “We now have to clean up this mess,” he stated. “Try to make it quick Rob. I can’t stand to see people suffer. We’ll take care of Derek and the others after.”

“With pleasure,” Rob responded.

Dillon’s heart pounded in his chest. He knew now that his life was about to be cut short. And the worst thing was that he got his sister and brother mixed up in this as well, and now they were about to pay the ultimate price because of him.

“How are you going to explain the disappearances of three kids?” Derek insisted, trying to talk reason into the madman. “Don’t do this!” he yelled.

“Oh … we’ll think of something,” said Troy as he dismissed Derek’s plea. “We always do.”

Rob strolled over and stood before the boys. He reached down, going for Dillon’s neck, but before he could get close enough Jordan shot his hand up and grabbed the man’s wrist. Rob smiled. Then his smile turned into a look of confusion as he found that he couldn’t move his hand toward Dillon anymore. He looked at Jordan who stared back, a mischievous grin on his face. Jordan held up his other hand revealing a small syringe with the label on it that read: Centrigenix. Before Rob could react Jordan grabbed him by the shirt and threw him across the room. Rob slammed into the other guy who, a moment earlier, helped bring Dillon and Jordan into the room from the lab. The man slammed the back of his head into the wall and the crack from the blow reverberated

through the room. Both he and Rob slumped to the ground in a heap.

Tara grabbed Gwen and pulled her aside as Rob flew through the air like a rag doll. They both stumbled and fell to the ground. Troy dived out of the way of the human projectile.

“Whoa!” was all that Dillon could say as he looked at his brother’s handy-work.

Jordan smiled at him. “This stuff works pretty good! Quick, go grab Gwen,” he yelled as he headed to the cages. Dillon nodded and ran as fast as he could toward the fray of bodies, hoping he would get there before they got back to their senses.

“Stop them!” Troy yelled as he stumbled toward one of the nearby desks.

Dillon leaped over top of Rob and the other guy and grabbed Gwen by the hand. Her eyes were still glowing yellow. Tara still held onto Gwen’s other arm as she tried to get up. Dillon quickly slipped his pack off and swung it as hard as he could. He heard a loud crack as the bag landed squarely on the woman’s face. She jolted backward and hit the floor, writhing in pain and holding her nose.

Jordan got to Derek’s cage, grabbed the lock, and pulled it off as though it was made of cheap plastic instead of steel. Derek looked at him in amazement, but before he could say anything Jordan was off to the next cage tearing the lock free.

Troy reached for something in one of the desks. It was a small tablet. He started sliding his finger across the screen and hitting buttons as he went. Jordan finished breaking the last lock off the cages and turned to see where Dillon was. As he did so, he heard the ugly howl of coyotes, and a loud hissing sound. He smiled as he saw creatures coming into the room from the hallway to the left. There were three coyote-type creatures, that large snake-thing they had encountered in the information center, and a few of those spider beasts.

“Let’s do this!” Jordan screamed.

Dillon pulled Gwen up and tried to get her away from the sprawled-out people they were in the midst of. Rob was beginning to stir, but the other guy looked as though he was out cold. Dillon managed to get Gwen over to where the others were. Thankfully she didn’t resist or appear as if she was going to put

up a fight; she just stared blankly with those yellow eyes.

The people working at the stations were equally disinterested in the events that were transpiring around them. They just sat at their terminals and continued to work. It was both comical and eerie all at the same time!

“Make sure nothing happens to Gwen,” Dillon shouted to his brother as he grabbed something out of the side of his backpack and started off, running for Troy as fast as he could.

“What are you doing you numbskull!” Jordan cried after him.

Dillon ducked as one of the coyotes lunged for him, narrowly missing him as he ran for Troy. Troy looked up just in time to see Dillon charging. He tried to move out of the way but couldn’t get clear. Dillon leaped upon him and plunged the Necrotoxin into Troys side. Troy screamed in pain and managed to backhand Dillon across the face. The boy tumbled off. He almost swooned, but managed to shake away the dizziness. He lunged toward Troy with his other hand, another syringe leading the way. Troy howled and thrashed. He hit Dillon’s arm and the syringe went flying from his grasp. It hit the ground and rolled away. Troy grabbed his head and screamed more as he hunched over. Dillon was surprised that the syringe didn’t shattered on impact when it hit the floor. He counted himself lucky and tried to dive toward it but Troy suddenly swung out with one of his arms and hit the boy on the side. Dillon felt the wind being blasted from his lungs with the force of the blow which sent him flying into the wall.

“What have you done?” screamed Derek as they all watched in horror as Troy began to transform.

Dillon shook off the dizziness again and stumbled back toward the cages where Gwen and Jordan were with Derek and Tom Tom.

“I was trying to get him with the Necrotoxin *and* Genesis!” Dillon tried to explain. “But he knocked Genesis out of my hand before I could inject him.”

“Good idea—bad execution!” Derek screamed.

“Ya … sorry about that.”

They heard bone crunching and skin tearing. His howls turned into a deep, guttural, demonic scream. He fell over a nearby chair and curled up on the ground, writhing in absolute pain. Four large spikes shot out of his back spraying

blood and yellowish spinal fluid everywhere; his muscles bulged as they tore through his shirt, and his skin turned a dark bluish hue. As Troy's transformation ensued, even the creatures who had charged into the room a moment earlier stopped their approach toward their intended victims.

Troy's screams died down and his writhing slowed until he finally stopped moving.

"Is he dead?" Dillon heard Gwen say in a soft quivering voice.

He looked at her in dismay. Her eyes no longer shone in that eery yellow glow. A moment earlier she was a captive zombie but now she appeared normal. He looked over to where John and the others were and noticed that they were shaking their heads and regaining their senses.

The creatures that had entered the room were all looking around as though they were unsure of who they should attack. Their eyes didn't glow anymore either. A coyote approached the monstrous mass that used to be Troy and began to sniff and growl at it. With lightning speed a large clawed hand grabbed the creature by the neck. A loud snap was heard and the coyote went limp.

Still holding the unfortunate creature in his grasp, the monster that had been Troy a moment earlier began to slowly stand; his back facing Dillon and the others. It grasped the edge of one of the tables for support as it stood to its full height. That was when Dillon noticed the shattered tablet that Troy used to call the creatures—and probably control John and the others—at his feet.

Rob, still shaking off the dizziness, was able to finally stand. He looked over to the towering monster. His eyes went wide as he saw the hulking beast just a few feet from where he was. He turned to run when Troy swung his free arm around. The massive clawed hand hammered into the back of Rob, sending him flying into the wall. His limp body skipped off the wall and bounced to the floor. He rolled a couple times and came to rest at Dillon's feet. The young boy looked down at the body in horror, then glanced up to where Troy was.

The huge beast turned around slowly. His head was misshapen to resemble more of a dog than a human. His eyes were large and bloodshot, and he now had huge canine fangs protruding from his massive maw. He looked down at his transformed body as if trying to process what had happened to him, then he

threw the dead coyote to the side. The creature flew into one of the spider things which issued a high-pitched shrill. Troy narrowed his eyes at Dillon and began to growl.

“What now?” Jordan asked, desperation in his voice.

“We need that syringe,” Dillon replied, looking over to where it had bounced and rolled across the ground. “It’s our only option now.”

Troy hunched low and opened both his hands fully, showing his wicked looking claws. He stared at the boys with evil intent and roared, spittle spraying from his mouth.

25

THE FIGHT FOR THEIR LIVES!

Jordan grabbed Gwen and dove to the side as the monster charged. Derek, Dillon and Tom Tom scattered, scrambling to get out of the way just in time as the beast slammed into the cages, crumpling the bars as though they were nothing.

Jordan easily sprinted to the other side of the room with Gwen under one arm. He felt so charged up from the Centrigenix as he leaped into the air and easily cleared some chairs, a lab table, and one of the guys who was still coming out from the mind control of the neurogenic transmitter. He landed softly on the other side and ducked down behind the table with his little sister. As they came over the counter one of the coyotes lunged in their direction. Jordan threw his arm out wide in order to protect him and his sister. His backhand connected with the creature with such force that it was sent flying all the way across the room. It hit the wall with a crack and crumpled to the ground. He looked at his hand for a moment, not sure what to make of his new-found power. Apparently his reflexes were just as dialled up as his muscles were.

"You wait here okay Gwen," Jordan said softly as he turned and looked at her, trying to be as soothing as possible. "Try and hide from … well … everything." He stood up and turned to head back. Gwen grabbed his arm.

"Be careful please," she said, tears welling up in her eyes.

Jordan smiled back at her and nodded. His face turned grim as he surveyed the chaos. A couple of the spider creatures were attacking one of the scientists

who, a moment earlier, was under the influence of the neurogenic transmitter. John, himself, was fighting off the other coyote with what appeared to be a chair leg and a scalpel, and Tom Tom was keeping the serpent-thing busy. Then he saw it—the main event was about to begin once Troy dislodged himself from the bars—Troy verses Derek! Derek was equipping himself for the fight as he walked toward the creature.

Man! That guys got guts! Jordan thought to himself.

DILLON SCRAMBLED OVER ROB'S LIMP BODY AS HE DISTANCED HIMSELF FROM the creature in his search for the syringe. Troy grunted as he pulled himself out from the mangled mess of bars and whipped his head around to see Dillon across the room. His eyes narrowed and his lips curled up in a monstrous snarl as he started toward him. Suddenly a loud crack rang through the air. His head jolted to the side with the force of the blow. He shook it off and turned to see Derek standing there with a chunk of bar he had grabbed from the cages.

Derek went in for another strike but Troy easily deflected it with his huge muscled forearm. The force of the hit would have broken a regular persons arm in two, but the beast acted as though he didn't even feel it. Derek swung again, but Troy grabbed the bar and ripped it from his grasp.

The monster stood to his full ten foot height, howled like a demon—spit spraying from his mouth—and came down toward Derek. The battle-hardened man tried to maneuver around and grab another weapon, but held his ribs and winced in pain which caused him to stumble and slump to this knees. He got into the best defensive position he could in order to receive the charge from the creature, but knew it would be futile, and that his life was about to end.

The monster stormed in; he could almost smell its foul breath.

JORDAN SAW DEREK ATTACK THE CREATURE AND KNEW HE NEEDED HELP. HE

easily leaped over the counter and sprinted toward Troy. He could see the monster coming in at Derek with the force of a rhino. With all the power he could generate with his enhanced body he slammed into the behemoth with his shoulder. He issued a loud scream as he rocked into the beast.

Troy was launched into the air with the strength of a giant and crashed into the wall of cages again. Derek couldn't believe what he saw!

"Get out of here!" Jordan yelled, rubbing his shoulder with his hand. His charge was effective but he didn't come away from it totally unscathed. In truth, however, Jordan felt that he got less hurt than he would have ever expected to. He walked over to what was left of the cages and easily pulled a chunk of bar from the concrete floor.

"Not gonna happen kid," Derek replied as he pulled himself up and limped over and retrieved the bar he had just a moment earlier. "We're gonna do this together."

Jordan smiled. It was a weird feeling as he never really considered himself incredibly brave before. But now he just had a feeling of absolute superiority. It *had* to be the Centrigenix.

"I don't know what you're on," said Derek, "but I wish I had some."

Jordan smiled at the comment.

Troy shook his head again as he got up from the mess once more and howled. He now appeared angrier than ever!

DILLON LOOKED OVER TO WHERE TROY WAS AND SAW DEREK HIT HIM ON THE side of the head with such force that he could hear the crack reverberate throughout the room. He knew that he had to find Genesis fast. He scrambled around the floor on his hands and knees in search of the syringe. He knew it had to be over here somewhere. Then he saw it! It had rolled under one of the lab tables when it was knocked from his hand. He started to crawl toward it when suddenly he felt something grab his leg. He turned to see Tara trying to pull him in. Her nose was clearly broken from the impact of Dillon's backpack earlier—

blood dripped easily from it as she reached for the boy with her other hand. Dillon shot his free leg out and smashed her in the face again. Oh how she screamed as his foot shattered her nose more thoroughly!

She let go of his leg as she cried out in agony, cupping her face in her hands. When Dillon turned his head back toward his goal he saw one of the spiders standing in front of it, staring at him with its large bulbous eyes. It's pincers snapped threateningly.

TOM TOM BARELY MANAGED TO DODGE THE SNAPPING MAW OF THE SNAKE creature. He didn't know if he could keep this up for much longer. He heard the chaotic battles that were going on throughout the entire room, but tried to remain focussed upon the current threat in front of him.

The creature swung a scaly clawed hand around and clipped the man on the shoulder. Tom Tom screamed in pain as he grabbed for his shoulder and fell back, tripping over a chair and landing hard on the floor. Four lines of blood splayed through his shirt where the thing had hit him. It hissed and reared up, much like a cobra would do just before it came in to strike the final blow on its victim. As it came in for the kill Tom Tom quickly grabbed the chair and shot it upwards in its path. The thing hit it hard, snapping and hissing, trying to get to its prey. Tom Tom felt himself sliding across the floor from the force that the creature was exerting on the chair. For some reason it wasn't reaching around with its muscled arms, but was rather trying to slither through the desperate man's defences with its head. The old man only hoped that the creature would continue to, apparently, forget about its other appendages. If it did he thought that he might have a chance.

He held on stubbornly with each lunge of the snake, not willing to allow the creature to take his life from him.

JORDAN SIDESTEPPED THE INCOMING ATTACK. HE FELT THE CLAWED HAND PASS BY him just inches from his face.

Derek swung his bar from the other side and connected solidly on Troy's arm. The creature howled and came up at him with his other hand. As he swung around Jordan connected with his bar solidly on the beast's side. The shock of the blow rocked the huge creature from his solid footing and put him off balance.

Derek came in again, but Troy managed to react quicker than the man had expected and blocked the blow. The creature returned the strike and Derek tried to get out of the way but got clipped on the shoulder by his massive hand. Despite the lessened force in the attack due to Jordan's hit, Derek went flying back and spun around a couple of times before landing on a table and toppling onto the ground.

Troy held his side where Jordan landed the hit and backed away a step from the kid. He eyed him cautiously. "You fast and strong," Troy grunted, shifting to the side.

Jordan frowned as he looked at Troy. "You ape man or something? That's not how people talk."

Troy smiled, his yellowed eyes glinting with cunning. "You die," he said, and then he rushed in at Jordan.

DILLON EYED THE CREATURE AS IT SLOWLY MOVED TOWARD HIM MENACINGLY. HE backed up and started to stand. The spider leaped! Dillon ducked just in time as the creature flew overtop of him. He spun around quickly to see that the spider had already landed and was running toward him again. As it sprang he deftly unslung his backpack and swung it out in front. It clipped the creature and sent it off to the side. Hardly injured, it jumped at Dillon again. This time he barely got his pack out in front. The thing latched on, trying to climb overtop and onto the young boy. It snapped its pincers wildly, tearing into the bag.

Frantically, Dillon tried to shake it off, but the thing wouldn't let go. It snapped at one of Dillon's hands. He managed to pull mostly out of the way, but

got nipped across two of his fingers. He screamed in pain as he pulled his hand back and threw the bag to the floor as he backed away.

The horrid creature climbed out from behind it and advanced. It leaped and Dillon dove under the nearby table. The thing nimbly landed on top of the table. Dillon crouched down, looking to both sides wondering which way the creature would attack from. He looked at his hand and noticed that the cuts weren't too bad. He just hoped the spider wasn't venomous, but he'd have to worry about that later.

As he looked around he noticed the syringe again, only a few feet from where he was hiding. Quickly, he shot his hand out from under the table and grabbed it, hoping that the spider thing didn't see the movement. As he looked up, he saw Gwen pulling supplies out of a cupboard. She snatched up a scalpel in shaking hands and crawled into the hiding place. He had one last glimpse of her tear streaked face before she pulled the door closed.

Dillon's gut twisted with guilt. He had gotten Gwen into this. She hadn't asked to face a gruesome death. His curiosity did that to her. He gripped the syringe tighter in his fist. He wouldn't let Gwen die. He would die first.

As fast as lightning he sprang out from under the table in a dead run toward Troy.

TOM TOM'S ARMS WERE GETTING WEAK WITH THE RELENTLESS ATTACKS OF THE creature. He knew his time was near. The creature had finally realized that its arms were long enough to reach around the chair the old man was using to defend himself. It swung an arm around and grabbed Tom Tom by the shoulder. It squeezed down hard, sinking its dirty claws into the man's flesh. Tom Tom screamed!

With that one arm it hoisted him into the air. Tom Tom's screams echoed throughout the room. The snake hissed wildly and pulled back his other arm, readying for the final blow that would take the man down.

The old man's eyes rolled back into his head from the pain, then he felt

himself falling. He hit the ground hard and felt pain shooting through his body. Everything was spinning. He didn't know if he was dead or still alive. Then he heard a familiar voice speaking to him.

"Tom Tom! Tom Tom!" came the voice.

His eyes fluttered open and there, staring at him from above, was John!

"You okay old friend?" John asked frantically. "Speak to me!"

"You need to shave," replied Tom Tom weakly as he tried to smile.

John laughed. "Come on then. We need to get you out of here."

"What happened to the snake-thing?"

"I gave it a cocktail of acidic chemicals to take it down a notch," John replied. "It's not going to bother anyone again."

Tom Tom looked over at the creature only a few feet away writhing on the ground in absolute agony. It appeared to be in its death throes. "You got anymore of that?" he asked.

"Unfortunately not," replied John as he placed one of Tom Tom's arms around his neck. "I have no more compounds to use. The others are on their own with that." He turned slightly to note the battle that was going on by the cages with Troy, Jordan, and Derek. They saw Derek go down and Jordan knock the creature into the cages again.

"That kid's got spirit," Tom Tom remarked.

"He has more than that," John replied cryptically. "Let's hope it's enough," he finished as he began moving Tom Tom to the other side of the room, careful to avoid those who would never have a chance to leave again.

DILLON RAN ACROSS THE ROOM AS FAST AS HIS FEET WOULD CARRY HIM. HE glanced back and saw that the spider was in pursuit and gaining on him. He looked down at the syringe while he ran and knew that he only had one shot at this. At that moment he realized he couldn't be concerned with the spider-thing right now. He knew what he had to do.

TROY CAME AT JORDAN WITH ALL HIS FURY! THE TEENAGER MET THE CHARGE. He balled up his hand into a tight fist and punched Troy right in the stomach as he came in. He could tell that the blow had hurt the creature, but Troy didn't relent from his attack. He swung his fist around and nailed Jordan right in the face. Jordan's head rocked to the side, but he shook off the blow.

Jordan punched again, this time hitting him in the face. Troy's head snapped back from the blow. The creature grabbed Jordan around the throat with his other hand and punched him in the stomach. The kid felt that one! But he shook off the pain and came in again with another punch, screaming as he did. Troy took the punch and pulled back again with his free hand, opening it as he did, showing his terrible claws, claws that were surely going to disembowel the kid. Somehow Jordan managed to grab the beast's wrist and deflect the oncoming blow. One claw managed to glance across Jordan's side, drawing a line of blood. Jordan winced from the pain, but took the opportunity to kick out at Troy's leg. He hit him solidly in the upper thigh which caused the monster to stumble a little.

Troy quickly recovered and hoisted Jordan up by the neck and slammed him against the wall. The boy didn't give in but continued to trade blows with the creature. Blood started to flow from both of their faces. Jordan realized that the Centrigenix must also have pain dampening properties in order to endure this amount of punishment, as he seemed to be holding his own against the ferocious beast.

He felt Troy's grip tightening, trying to close off his air supply. He shot his free hand up and grabbed the creature's arm. He started to press down with all his enhanced might. The strength of the two opponents seemed comparable to each other as Jordan couldn't break the hold. He dropped the bar and grabbed on with his other hand and started to scream as he pressed down on the creature's wrist, trying to break the hold.

Troy reached back with his other hand, winding up for another strike. Jordan started to gasp—Troy's grip was beginning to have an affect and he couldn't break the hold. He could feel the creature's claws digging into the back of his

neck as he continued to squeeze the life out of him.

Troy roared! Jordan knew that he was about to enter into darkness and he was certain he wouldn’t be coming out of it.

26

ANSWERS

Jordan gasped, trying desperately to get air into his lungs. Troy pulled back his free arm and readied to deliver the final blow. The beast snarled, but then suddenly glanced to the side.

Dillon crashed into the creature and plunged the syringe into the arm that was holding his brother. Troy instantly let go of Jordan and began to scream as he held his arm. Jordan crumpled to the ground holding his throat and gasping. The spider that was chasing Dillon leaped for the young boy, but Dillon pushed himself off of Troy and crashed hard on the ground. The spider-creature landed on the monster as it started to move away from the boys.

The monster stumbled away screaming. He looked in horror at his arm as it actually combusted! The spider tried to leap away but the flames quickly spread and ignited it as well. It squealed but still jumped for Dillon again. The boy quickly shot out his foot and knocked it away. It shrieked and then slumped to the ground, being consumed by the fire.

The flames quickly spread to all other parts of Troy's body as he ran wildly in any direction he could. The screams were horrific! He didn't make it far before succumbing to his fate. The smell of burning flesh quickly filled the air.

Dillon went right to Jordan to see if he was okay. Derek stumbled to his feet and stared at the combusting mass just a few feet away.

"Are you okay bro?" Dillon asked.

Jordan nodded, unable to talk just yet.

Relief hit him as he slump back, thankful that his brother was alright. Then it struck him. “Wait … we need to see if Gwen’s okay!” Dillon said urgently, remembering that his sister was stowed away in a cupboard.

Dillon ran over as fast as he could and threw the cupboard doors open. Gwen shrieked. When she saw Dillon standing there she dropped the scalpel and launched herself at him. He wrapped her in a big hug that seemed to last forever.

“You’re okay,” he reassured her. “We all are.”

After what seemed a long while she finally let go. She wiped the tears from her eyes and followed her brother over to where Jordan and Derek were. She ran to Jordan and wrapped her arms around him.

“Come on everyone. We have to go,” said an insistent Tom Tom waving them over from the other side of the room. He and John were standing at the door on the opposite side of the room from where Dillon, Jordan, and Gwen came through earlier.

Derek, the kids, and two of John’s team members who managed to survive the onslaught rushed over and, as Dillon was exiting the room, his eyes glanced upon the smouldering mass of what remained of Troy’s monstrous body. After a brief moment he turned and walked away, sealing that image in his mind.

They walked through a corridor and came to another room which had the label “Medical Aid” written above it.

“We’ll look at everyone’s injuries here before we head back to the resort,” John explained as he opened the door.

The room was large and well furnished with all the supplies they needed. Everyone found a cot to sit down on as John and his crew started to assess everyone’s injuries. Thankfully, one of the men who had survived, Trevor, had medical training and started addressing the injuries.

“Good job Dillon.” Derek congratulated as he sat beside him waiting for Trevor to get set up with his supplies. “But are you okay?” he asked sympathetically.

Dillon looked at him for a long moment, not really understanding at first what Derek was asking. Then the realization of his question, and what he had just done, began to sink in as tears started to well up in his eyes.

“You had no choice,” Derek said comfortingly. “It was either Troy or the rest of us.”

Dillon choked back the tears as his eyes went red and just nodded, fearing that he would burst out crying if he said a word. He had just killed someone and a massive load of guilt started to well up inside of him.

“Who’s this?” John asked as he approached with another first aid kit.

“This is Dillon Hunt. The boy who is responsible for cracking all the clues you left for us in order to find you,” Derek replied. “He’s also primarily responsible for saving us with his quick thinking of using the Necrotoxin and the Genesis serum.”

Dillon knew that Derek was trying to justify his actions, but he wasn’t sure he could ever feel good about the outcome of the choice he just made. It all happened so fast and he didn’t consider the consequences until after the confrontation was in full swing. Was there a better way he could have handled the situation so that he wasn’t forced to take a life? Could he have used Jordan with his increased strength and speed to overpower everyone? Or was the action that he took merely the action of a boy whose imagination was overactive which clouded his judgement and caused him to make a rash decision? These were the thoughts—and many more like them—that spiralled through the young boy’s mind.

“Well then. I’m very pleased to meet you Dillon Hunt. Any relation to … ” Derek put his hand on John’s arm and shook his head slightly in order to stop him from saying more; a move that Dillon didn’t miss.

“You know Dillon, I’m impressed,” John continued with a big smile. “How did you know that the Necrotoxin wouldn’t react well with the Genesis serum?”

Dillon wiped his face with his shirt sleeve. “The little bit of information I was able to read about the chemicals in the lab said that they don’t react well together. I also saw one of the creatures combust just by touching Oasis land which I already knew was created by Genesis.”

John laughed. “Very good! You’re absolutely right. These two chemicals don’t react well together. In fact, the Necrotoxin is made from the waste that is produced when Genesis is created. With the addition of a couple more

compounds in the right quantities that act as reacting agents, even the slightest contact causes them to violently respond to one another. It's a bit of a failsafe I built into the Necrotoxin in order to make sure there was a way to manage the creatures just in case any of them needed to be dealt with."

"You did that while under mind-control?" Dillon asked.

John shrugged. "I guess. I can't explain how I managed it. It was almost like a waking dream most of the time. But I guess that, just like some people learn to control parts of their dreams, I learned to control some parts of my actions. I couldn't help but conform to their wishes, but part of me was able to control, to an extent, some of the outcome."

"The thing that strikes me as odd though," Derek interjected, "is that this Tokala tribe doesn't appear to me as having the ability to do all of this alone."

"That's because they didn't," came Tom Tom's reply as he walked over to join the conversation. "There's someone else behind this."

"Who?"

"I don't know. The elders are really tight-lipped about it."

"Well that's a problem," Derek stated matter-of-factly.

"So does that mean that the whole tribe who owns and runs the place was in on it?"

"No, not at all," Tom Tom replied, almost sheepishly. "We were deceived by the elders of our tribe just as you and the rest of the world have been over the last number of years. The elders came to us before we built any of the resort and explained that they had received a vision from the spirit animals that roamed these parts, and that they led them to a hidden oasis in the desert that no one knew about.

"Of course we were all skeptical at first, but when they showed it to us and explained their vision of the future; that they were going to revitalize our tribe through the management of this oasis, the creation of the hotel, and the land which they would give us to live in this paradise … we couldn't refuse the offer."

"But why weren't you able to storm in and find John without my help?" asked Dillon, wondering where he fit into this. "And why me?"

Derek looked to the others for a moment and then back to Dillon. “We couldn’t risk an overt assault as we didn’t know exactly what we were dealing with. We had sent covert teams in over the course of almost eighteen months and they found nothing. So we needed a different approach—we needed you.”

Dillon’s face went pale. “But why me?” he blurted, almost feeling like he was on a roller coaster ride that he couldn’t get off. “How did you know I would be able to help?”

“Because you have those special abilities we talked about and saw in action,” Derek replied. “Remember that I told you that you were destined for something greater? As you get older it will all make more sense to you. I promise. When the time is right you will know.” Derek put a hand on his shoulder and smiled. “Come on, we need to get out of here so I can let our team know where this place is so we can clean it up. You kids must be tired.”

Trevor and John bandaged up the group as best they could with the supplies they had. Thankfully no one was really that injured, even Jordan, whose body had started to heal itself with the aid of Centrigenix.

Dillon had a thousand more questions he wanted to ask but somehow knew he wouldn’t be getting any answers. He resigned to the fact that he would have to be patient and hopefully get those answers later—except for one.

“Why does the Takala tribe leave a symbol of a boxed-in pentagram with the eye in the middle of it all over the place?”

John, Tom Tom, and Derek all stopped and looked at him in stunned silence. It was as if he had just dropped a bomb.

“What are you talking about?” Tom Tom asked.

“What?” Derek asked as well.

“You know, the symbol on the wall at the front desk in the hotel, here in the tunnel, and carved into the counter at the information center?”

That’s … ” Derek started to say. “That’s nothing,” he said after he composed himself.

“But what does it mean?” Dillon asked.

“I don’t know,” Derek responded. “But I’m going to find out.”

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THE VACATION'S END

"Dillon! Dillon!" he heard someone say as he felt himself being shaken.

Dillon's eyes started to flutter and then he had a sudden feeling of dread. His eyes popped open as he tried to back away from whatever it was that was shaking him.

"Whoa … easy."

He felt disoriented and was sure that some sort of monster was trying to attack him. His eyes darted around trying to find out where he was and what was going on. As he adjusted to his surroundings he realized that he was safe in his hotel room. Dad was standing in front of him and smiling disarmingly at him.

"It's just me. Dad."

Dillon looked around skeptically but quickly realized that he actually was in his room. His brother Jordan was snoring loudly in the bed next to him.

"You kids need to get up," Dad said as he pulled back the curtains to the room and let the sunlight flood in. Jordan flinched and moaned as though he was a creature of the night who despised the light.

"Come on Jordan!" Dad hollered at him as he took his pillow and hit him a couple of times with it. Finally Jordan's eyes opened slowly.

Somehow, he managed to pull himself up. All Dillon could think about was the crash that John said he would experience from the Centrigenix.

"What is it?" Jordan managed to mumble.

“We’re half way through our vacation and Mom and I have planned an awesome hike to the hot springs, with lunch, and a tour around the outskirts of the Oasis,”

Dillon rubbed his face. He wasn’t too keen on seeing more of this place after the events of last night. In truth, he was ready to go home.

“Come on guys! It’s going to be fun, but we need to get moving if we’re going to have time to do everything,” Dad exclaimed.

Dillon didn’t know what to think. How was Jordan going to make such a trip in his condition?

“So come on guys. I want you up and down stairs in an hour so we can get moving on this,” Dad said as he headed for the door.

After he was gone, Dillon went over to his brother who looked like he lapsed back into a coma. “Hey Jordan. Are you gonna be alright? That Centrigenix really kicked your butt!”

Jordan looked over at his little brother; his eyes were a little bloodshot. “What are you talking about?” he asked. “Centri … what … ?”

Dillon thought Jordan was messing with him at first, but when he mentioned the weird creatures they battled, and the monster who used to be “the gate keeper” Troy, and how Jordan had super-human power to help defeat the creatures, his brother scoffed at him.

“You and your imagination,” he said as he rolled back over and pulled the pillow over his head.

Dillon sat back, not quite understanding what was going on. Then he remembered that after they got out of the the main lab, they went to another smaller room with more lab equipment where John was able to use some sort of chemical compound to break down the neurogenic implant in himself and Gwen so that they wouldn’t be subject to being controled anymore. After he was done, he also said that he needed to inject Gwen and Jordan with another mixture which was supposed to help them both overcome any of the possible side effects of having the invasive materials inside of them, and to help Jordan recover easier when the Centrigenix wore off.

Dillon wondered if any of those injections could be the cause of the apparent

memory loss. He needed to find out. He needed to see Gwen right away.

"Boy, what is it with these kids today?" Dillon heard his Dad say to himself as he saw him coming out of the girl's room.

"Everything okay Dad?" he asked as he approached the room.

"Oh, it's okay. Just dealing with kids that don't want to get up, even though it's already ten."

"Let me see if I can help," Dillon said as he moved passed Dad and pushed the door open. "Time to rise and shine!" he yelled as he came into their room and jumped on the nearest bed. Claire groaned. Gwen didn't look much better when he promptly jumped over and began to shake her.

After about five minutes of shaking and yelling he realized that it wasn't going to work. He left the room and went to find Dad.

"Hey Dad," he called out as he entered his parent's room. "Jordan and Gwen don't look well. Maybe they came down with a bug or something? I think we'll have to postpone our day trip."

"Oh … okay," Dad replied, looking a little dejected. "I guess we'll just have to find something else to do until they get better."

That's one of the things that Dillon really liked about his Dad, he always tried to look for the silver lining in his experiences.

"I'll go and check on them and see if they need anything," said Mom as she moved passed Dillon and into the hall.

Dillon offered his Dad a little smile before exiting.

Jordan ended up staying in bed that entire day. When Gwen finally got up at the crack of 3:00, Dillon managed to have some conversations with her and probed her about the night before without saying anything too definite about what happened. He asked questions such as: "How was your night? What did you do? What time did you get to bed at? Who were you with?" The answers she gave definitely told him that she too was experiencing memory loss. The troubling question he had was: "Why did Derek and John leave his memories

intact?”

He still had a ton of unanswered questions he wanted to ask Derek, but in truth, he didn’t even know if he would see him again. The whole thing was a whirlwind; almost dreamlike. The only troubling fact was that he knew it wasn’t a dream. Dillon had definitely been in danger multiple times throughout his time here; or at least that’s what he thought. He started to doubt the experiences of the last few days. *Was he really in danger?* he thought to himself. Then he noticed the lines of cuts on his hand where the spider had gotten him. No. He knew that it was real. He knew he had experienced real fear, and he definitely was responsible for the death of Troy. The problem was that he couldn’t tell anyone about it.

He spent most of that night by himself, laying by the pool and contemplating his recent experiences. He laughed at Dad’s jokes and enjoyed seeing his sister have fun in the pool. Most of it was an act as he really didn’t feel like laughing. He really enjoyed watching his little sister have fun given the fact that she could have been seriously hurt or killed the night before, and she didn’t even seem to remember it. Perhaps it was for the best. He almost wished that his memories would be taken from him; that he could have the images he saw scrubbed from his mind.

It was during this contemplative time that he knew what he had to do when he got home: he had to confide in Sarah. He knew that she would believe him. She was his best friend; the only friend he could count on one hundred percent.

“You okay Dillon?” came Mom’s soft voice. “You look depressed or something.”

“Ya … of course I’m good. Just a little tired. That’s all.”

“Okay honey. Just so you know, I’m here for you if you want to talk,” she ended as she got up and strolled over to the edge of the pool.

Sure! Dillon thought. *Hey mom. I just want to let you know that this place was created by a chemical serum called Genesis which was stolen by some madmen. I fought a bunch of creatures which were created by a by-product of the serum called Necrotoxin; Jordan juiced himself up with Centrigenix and was awesome at fighting battles in an underground secret lab where him, Gwen, and*

I were almost killed! Oh yeah … I guess I forgot to mention that your youngest daughter had a mind control chip implanted in her which made her turn against Jordan and I! Oh and … by the way … both of them have had their memories erased which means you need to take my word for it. And don't forget the fact that this whole family vacation was setup in order for a secretive group called Orion to get me here because I, apparently, have some sort of special ability to uncover clues or something like that. Ya … I'm sure she would listen!

Dillon chuckled to himself.

What a ride! he thought to himself. *What a ride indeed!*

THE FINAL WEEK OF THE HUNT FAMILY VACATION WAS UNEVENTFUL WHICH WAS quite alright with Dillon. Things seemed to be back to normal: Jordan was back to his irritating self, Gwen was as playful as ever, and Claire was … well … Claire. They were able to go on their hike, enjoy the springs, and see the rest of the sights.

Dillon conspicuously noted the absence of the bike shop lady, Tara. He was sure that Orion was dealing with all those shady figures who were behind the whole Oasis thing. That brought some disturbing thoughts to him regarding the future of the resort. He wondered if the place was going to get shut down and what was going to become of all those who lived here? From what he gathered, most of the residents were completely innocent.

It was actually a weird feeling to be finally enjoying himself. It took a couple of days but he stopped looking over his shoulder or jumping at every sound while they were hiking through the forest. The best part about it was that Dillon didn't have anymore strange dreams. That was a total relief to him!

He really wished that he had an opportunity to talk to Derek, or someone, about his dreams, but he felt so strange about them that he was afraid to even mention them. He couldn't figure out how they could have been so real in picturing events that eventually formed into some sort of reality—not exactly as he pictured them but in rough form. He definitely had a hard time thinking that

anyone would believe him, and he didn't want to be labeled as a crackpot. The only people who might even entertain the fact that they were real were probably Derek and Sarah, and he never had a chance to speak with Derek about it.

He reasoned at that moment that if he had the courage to, he would talk to Sarah about it. He knew she would understand.

DILLON THREW HIS CLOTHES INTO HIS SUIT CASE HAPHAZARDLY. HE TRIED TO separate the dirty ones from the clean ones, but he wasn't really concerned about it; he knew Mom would take care of that when they got home. He tossed a pair of pants into the suitcase and heard something hard fall onto the ground. He looked down and noticed JTS's watch. He reached down and scooped it up. He knew he had given all of John's stuff back, including the watch.

"How did this get in my pants*?*" he mumbled to himself.

He went back into the case and started rummaging around to see if there was anything else unusual in any of his other clothes. Nothing. He held the watch up before him and opened it. A small slip of paper dropped out. He picked it up and unfolded it. It was a letter from Derek!

DILLON,

THE ORION GROUP WOULD LIKE TO THANK YOU FOR YOUR DILIGENT EFFORT IN helping us with this case. Because of you many people were spared and you helped avert a possible catastrophe as we have learned that Troy and the others behind The Oasis Resort were planning on weaponizing the Necrotoxin and selling it to those who have no conscience about using it to harm others.

More than that, I would like to thank you for your help personally. You excelled beyond all of my expectations with your skill and resourcefulness. I am sorry that your brother and sister got involved. As it turned out, Jordan ended up

being one of the biggest assets in helping us win. It's too bad we had to wipe his memory of those heroic events. It's for his own good.

I know that you have many more questions that weren't answered. You need to be patient. Those answers will come in time. Until then, take care of yourself Dillon Hunt.

YOUR FRIEND ALWAYS,

DEREK VICO

DILLON PONDERED THE LETTER FOR A LONG TIME. IT SEEMED TO SUGGEST TO HIM that he hadn't seen the last of Derek and this Orion Group. He tucked the letter away in a safe place and carried on with getting his stuff packed.

As he continued to pack he didn't notice his sister, Claire, staring at him through his partially closed door. She watched as he placed the letter and watch in a side pocket of the suitcase. If Dillon wasn't so occupied with the thoughts that were whirling through his mind as he considered the contents of the letter he might have noticed Claire's glowing yellow eyes as she peered at him through the cracked door.

AS DILLON CAME BACK INTO THE LOBBY AFTER PUTTING THE LAST OF THE BAGS in the van he saw Tom Tom standing behind the front desk with Janeen. Dad seemed to be conversing with him easily. Dillon ran over to the old man. He hadn't seen him since that fateful night when they just barely made it out of the lab alive.

"Tom Tom!" he yelled as he hurried over. When he approached the desk he composed himself, trying hard not to seem too excited to see his new friend.

“Hi Dillon,” Tom Tom said to the young boy.

“Hey. How are you feeling?”

“Feeling?” Tom Tom replied, raising an eyebrow.

“I mean …” he began, “… the last I heard of you is that you weren’t feeling well. But of course that was a week ago.” *Good cover!* he thought to himself.

“Oh yes. I’m quite well. As a matter of fact, I was just telling your Dad that I have been named the next Executive Officer of the resort.”

“What! That’s awesome!” Dillon responded, not able to contain his enthusiasm.

“What’s more is that Tom Tom here has just informed me that our family has been drawn in some sort of guest lottery which means that we have won all-expenses paid vacations here every year for the next five years!” Dad exclaimed.

Dillon was speechless!

“That’s right Dillon,” said Tom Tom, “it’s the least we could do to show our appreciation to one of our guest families; especially one as deserving as yours.” He winked at Dillon, a sign the young boy didn’t miss.

“You’re too kind,” Dad said appreciatively. “Thank you.”

“No. It’s the least we could do.” He turned back to Dillon. “I guess we’ll see you again then Dillon.”

Dillon smiled widely. It sounded to him like things at the resort were going to be alright after all.

As his family rolled through the gate and onto the highway that led through the desert, Dillon looked back. He really didn’t know what had just happened to him over the last two weeks; it all seemed surreal. What he did know, however, is that things would never be the same for him again.

EPILOGUE

Jake opened the large doors which led to the study.

The size of the doors were an indication to the grandness of the library which lay beyond. There were large vaulted rows of shelves stretching the entire length of the massive room. At the very end of the room was an enormous window through which multitudes of radiant rays from the sun rained down illuminating the inside of the chamber with its warmth.

Down the middle of the room were large tables, most of which had an assortment of books, maps, and other rolled parchment strewn about them in no discernible pattern. The place resembled an archaic library that housed ancient books of ages gone by. There were, however, on one of the tables an array of computer equipment that added a modern touch to the ambiance of the aged place.

Standing to the side of one of the computers was a man who appeared to be deep in thought as he looked down at a large opened book. The man had short cropped white hair, a medium-lengthed white beard, and was wearing a set of large round glasses that were sitting on the end of his nose which allowed his eyes to glance overtop them as he read the information from the book he had open before him. He had on a sweater overtop a collared shirt, and his pants appeared to be beige Kakis. Sitting on the table just above the book was a small stone statue.

As Jake approached, he saw the man glance up from his work, apparently

alerted by his presence. “Hello Stephen,” greeted Jake.

Stephen didn’t appear overly happy to see the agent of Orion. “What are you doing here?” he asked as he slammed the book shut, his voice full of accusation. When he spoke he articulated his words in such a way that one could tell that he was well educated and probably came from a well-refined upperclass society.

“Come now, aren’t you glad to see me?” came Jake’s reply, trying to sound as though he was wounded by the cold greeting.

Stephen seemed to soften up a bit. “Sorry,” he replied. “It’s just that I’m in the middle of something and the answers aren’t coming as fluidly as they used to. It’s actually quite maddening!”

Jake didn’t say a word, but appeared as if he was interested. This was his way of coaxing others to speak. He often didn’t have to ask what their issues were, he would just wait and portray having a sympathetic ear which would cause them to just open up to him.

“I have this relic here,” Stephen started to say, “well … it’s actually a copy of a relic,” he picked it up off the table.

It was a small statue about eight inches high and appeared to be in the shape of a woman holding a small gem out in front of her with both hands. Stephen held it up in order for Jake to get a better look at it.

“You see this here,” he said, pointing at the gem. Jake nodded. “We are unsure if she is offering this to someone or if she is using it in some way.”

Jake looked confused. “Does it matter?”

“Does it matter!? Of course it matters! We think that this is one of the rouge stones from myth, but we aren’t sure … I’m not sure,” his voice trailed off, showing his frustration with his lack of knowledge.

Jake stayed silent, giving him a moment to compose himself.

“According to legend, the rouge stones are in the custody of guardians of some sort, but—so the tales say—one of them is missing and there are rumours that it was given to someone so they could hide it.” He put the statue down. “In truth, we don’t know if any of this is accurate or not, and the literature I have doesn’t provide any clues. If the guardians do exist then they have done a fantastic job keeping their whereabouts and society a secret.”

“We have reason to believe they exist,” Jake said unwaveringly. “What we don’t know are the specifics Dr. Specifics which you need to get for us.”

“What *reasons* do you have?” asked Stephen.

“That is classified,” said Jake with a smile.

“Great! That’s not helpful.”

Jake leaned on the table. “What about your … *powers*? Can’t you utilize those to assist you in your research?”

Stephen scoffed. “What powers? Those have faded away a long time ago.”

Jake smiled. “Don’t worry, we’ve found someone else who has your unique abilities.”

The Dr. looked at Jake suspiciously. “Who?”

Jake’s smile got even wider, “Dillon Hunt.”

Stephen rocked back a step. His face went pale and displayed a look of absolute horror. “No! You can’t! He’s only a boy.”

“Yes … a very resourceful boy. He was immensely helpful in helping us get back the Genesis serum.” He paused for effect. “As a matter of fact, a couple of the Hunt kids were very helpful.”

“You can’t,” Stephen whimpered, tears welling up in his eyes.

“Unfortunately Dillon’s father, Bruce, never inherited these traits. They say that sometimes these things skip a generation,” Jake said as he picked up the replica statue.

“I won’t cooperate anymore if you drag him into this,” the Dr. spouted.

“Oh … I think you will,” replied Jake. “Dillon will help us whether you will or not. It might be in your best interest for you to play along with us Dr. Hunt.

“Don’t worry, we won’t use Dillon for this mission just yet,” he stated, indicating the statue he was holding. “We have other plans and items we need him to find first.”

Dr. Hunt slumped down into a nearby chair, unable to say anything. He never wanted his grandson to be involved with Orion. He always wished that the traits he acquired would stop with him, but apparently they hadn’t. Dillon was now marked as an asset by Orion. An asset, he knew, they would exploit to the best of their ability.

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